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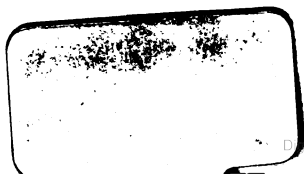
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GRAYWORTH.





# GRAYWORTH:

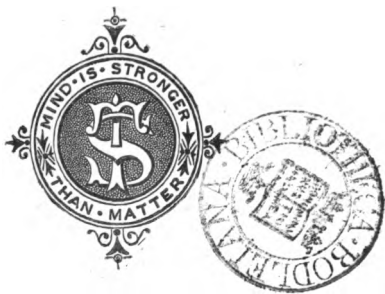
*A Story of Country Life.*

BY CAREY HAZELWOOD.

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*IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. I.*

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LONDON:  
SAMUEL TINSLEY, 34, SOUTHAMPTON ST., STRAND.  
1872.

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# GRAYWORTH.

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## CHAPTER I.

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### GRAYWORTH.

Mark where that old bowery willow throws  
Its tresses o'er the moss-grey garden rail ;  
How the lush woodbine dallies with the rose,  
And many a neighbour-flower, in pride and beauty blows !  
SPENCER T. HALL.

THE old homes and the happy haunts of our dear old friends are all among the sweet green hills—the hills of Derbyshire—whose summits are high enough to breast the floating clouds, and not too high to be surmounted by the most ordinarily aspiring of mankind who cares to climb them ; giving to the temperature diversity, and to the scenery the charm of picturesque variety ; glimpses of undulating landscape stretching far away into the undefined, suggestive distance, where mist and mountain and horizon meet—seldom excelled in the wider ranges of mere mountain scenery farther away from home.

In the lap of one of these hills lies one rich sweep of land, which, within the last few centuries, has nourished and sustained some thousands of living souls, and pillowed and sanctified their memory and their dust, since, weary of their pastimes on the earth, they returned to it, like little children to their mother's breast, to seek repose.

Had the hand of man arranged and finally completed this slope of land for his own dwelling place, it might well have been considered a grand constructive plan contrived to meet the needs of agricultural convenience and to cheer the age with natural beauty. Over a bed of shingles, varying from rich amber to a creamy white, ran a rivulet, limpid and pure as crystal, renewed by constant springs of clearest water. About the year 1800, previous to the great innovation of parallel bars of iron for the bearing of locomotives through the land, the stream was fresh and sparkling, as though it had taken its rise in the same year from rocks of parian : meandering along till it approached a little boulder stone here and there, it would delay its course to ripple for an instant, then leap down a tiny precipice, babbling of the free hills as it alighted amongst the water-worn stones, gaily twirl itself round and gambol away to the next and the next, on and on, until at length it was gathered quietly into the wider waters of the Derwent.

The slope upon which the village was built was so gentle that the stream could scarcely be said to be in a valley : it appeared to have been formed long ages

ago by the rush of a suddenly-liberated body of water, which, bursting the cavern it had been pent up in, bounded on rampant with tremendous force over the plain, carrying with it a mass of fragments of trees and rocks and other debris, cutting for itself a midway-shallow, till its force was spent, then subsiding, left a gentle and smooth slope each side the channel, the rocky bed of which, cleft here and there, replenishes the land with water-springs. Or it may have been formed by the last expiring throes of the mighty waters after one of those gigantic upheavals had taken place, numerous evidences of which are clearly visible in the coombs and peaks.

Soon after the Conqueror had laid waste the lower counties by fire and sword, there sprung up on these fruitful and well-watered banks a number of habitations, chiefly composed of rough-hewn stone, with straw for thatch, and nothing but the bare earth for their flooring. Up to the time of Edward the Fourth, the place was called Gris Fort ; then for some reason it was changed to Grayworth, the name it still retains.

Protected from the north and north-east by a chain of hills ranging some thousand to fifteen hundred feet above the sea level, the inhabitants found themselves sheltered from the rigorous weather of winter, while, from the pleasant undulating wooded and meadow land that opened broad and free to the south, they were enabled to enjoy all the salubrious influences of the other seasons.

The most cherished object in the village was the



little Norman church. Like its founders, it seemed to have planted itself deeply—to have taken firm hold of the hearts and the soil of the country. In its stalwart strength, it seemed to be in league with Time, for he passed lightly over its hoary head, leaving on it comparatively few traces of his trenchant blade; while of several other churches of more ornate pretensions every vestige was cut down, notwithstanding that these had borne a later date, and once towered near the same spot, in their boasted pride of youth and beauty, over the gray but grand sobriety of the solid older church.

In later times, even the hydra-headed giant, Railway Company, preferred to honour the sacred structure by partially encircling it with iron bands for the passage of its flange-wheeled freight, rather than attempt to pull down the venerable pile—that frowned fiercely in its strength on the little surveyor who was sent to inspect it, strictly with an eye to business, and who regarded the tenacious old church as a doctor would regard a tumour on a limb of one of his patients.

Inside the church were several ancient tombstones, dimly bearing quaint testimony, in Latin, to the virtues which had adorned “A beloved wife,” “A gentle sister,” “Two lovely infants,” severally celebrated for those highest types of the graces—Charity, Wisdom, and Beauty. But for all of later generations, the more recent, crumpled-faced memorial stones, of lesser durability, have long ago refused to hold the records once

entrusted to them, of the history, age, or nation of the mortal dust beneath. Oblivion had grown jealous of its memory, and blotted it out from the earth.

From the half-obliterated inscriptions on the grave-stones in the churchyard, might be gathered the fact that a goodly number of the departed whose relatives were in a position to erect monuments had lived to a good old age; and, notwithstanding the industrious and temperate habits of the people of Grayworth, that too many of its children died under five years of age. Ignorance in one form or other was doubtless the principal cause of the infant mortality, which could not be attributed to culpable neglect, since the people were remarkable, as a rule, for gentleness of disposition, manifesting itself strongly in love and tenderness towards their children. These possibly may have been allowed to overheat themselves in the scorching sun in summer-time, while their parents were busy in the harvest fields, or been tempted, from the great abundance of apples and pears growing thereabouts, to eat too freely of unripe or ill-assorted fruit.

The village consisted chiefly of the labouring class of people, and a few small vendors of food and trifles of haberdashery; and, like most other places of its kind, it was somewhat poor in winter. But though it lacked the gold procured by delving in the earth, it was rich in the gems that are scattered on its bosom in spring, summer, and autumn, when Flora glided over, shedding her store of flowers for all who spread a mantle for them; then Grayworth as a whole added pleasure and

gaiety to its customary contentment, through having husbanded its spare time in industrious gardening. The great appreciation the people had for flowers was demonstrated by their willingness to care for them. One might have believed oneself in Holland, by the bright and gorgeous display everywhere exhibited about the dwellings of the industrious poor here, showing that the inhabitants must have devoted to their cultivation many of those precious moments which otherwise would have been consumed in that idle repose which labourers are apt to revel in as one of the greatest luxuries of life.

A long row of lime-trees on each side of the road had grown old and spacious—perhaps by reason of national and local tranquillity, never having been wanted for barricades, as similar trees on more fashionable boulevards have occasionally been. These of themselves gave the place an air of coolness in the warmest weather, besides being further beautified by the addition of various climbing plants, which with their roots in rustic boxes on the little chamber window-sills, were thrown across to meet the trees, or rather twined themselves on common string attached to branches of the trees. These, crowning the green limes with living flowers of gorgeous hues, formed in the summer and harvest months picturesque arcades and bowers ; such as the authorities of any town would be proud to improvise on an occasion of the visit of a queen or a hero. The flowers, however, were of those sorts not yet modified by the cunning handy-work of

the garden artist ; and for the most part were simple and old-fashioned as the human face. The poor villagers, having to make a penny go a long way, collected their own flower seeds ; though had they bought them they could have procured for themselves some scores of plants, and hundreds, aye thousands of flowers from two or three pennies-worth of seeds. The display of their floral wealth was from beginning to end the fruit of their own industry and care. Rose trees and perennial climbers ornamented the outside walls of almost every house. Scarcely a little window in the whole village but was filled with tender plants, requiring much care in winter, and regarded generally as household treasures.

South of the irregular road which formed the village were two farms, adjoining each other ; one tenanted by William Brown, the other by Abel Armstrong.





## CHAPTER II.

### WHEN ABEL AND WILL WERE BOYS.

His fields seemed to know what their master was doing ;  
And turnips and corn-land, and meadow and lea,  
All caught the infection as generous as he.

WORDSWORTH.

**M**R. Brown, of Mapleberry Farm, was a true type of an old English farmer. He seemed to regard all the world outside a radius of some twelve miles from his own home as a kind of hazy stage, where a few prominent actors were seen to flit to and fro in uncertain lights, then glide away with indistinct movements into a dreamy region beyond his reach or interest. In his own circle his existence made that soothing sort of impression which rather proclaims the absence of vice than the possession of any special claim to great or meritorious virtues. His faith in his ancestry was the greatest pet of his fancy. This he nursed and fondled with peculiar tenacity to the last day of his life. But as it is not likely that others will be found to bestow upon it a similar degree of affection, it will perhaps be well to leave this shadowy child of his in his own bosom, with only the brief allusion that he laid claim

to the honour of being one of the numerous family whose ancestors came over to England with William the First : and in the face of all that had been said by historians of the perjury of Harold, of the will of the Confessor and the *will* of the Conqueror, of the profligacy of the English and the prowess of the Normans, Mr. Brown stoutly maintained that it was in the main owing to the excellency of his own ancestor's workmanship as a bridlesmith that the battle of Hastings was won, and that England was eventually subdued and laid under Norman rule. Mr. Brown furthermore claimed for his great ancestor the distinctive honour of having fashioned the self same bridle-bit with which the gallant conqueror inflicted upon the arms and shoulders of his queen a severe chastisement for her disobedience to him in succouring her favourite son, and favouring his rebellion against his father.

Mr. Brown was not too proud to confess that it was only within the last century that his family could boast a surname. Up to a comparatively recent period, its various members had recognised the different appellations of Johnses Joe, Johnses Joe's Matilda, Widow Martha's Edith, Red-haired Dorothy, One-eyed Ned, Big Ben's youngest son, Charley the thatcher, John the hammersmith; the vast number and variety of Smiths then in vogue doing great service in this line. As a set-off against the humiliation of having no family name, Mr. Brown would enumerate the many advantages of a low estate, through which had been handed down to him the good fortune of being a living branch

of the genealogical tree whose roots bore so remote and honest an origin. Other families had been demolished, root and branch, owing to their names and proud positions during a long period of changes and vicissitudes, while the sea of adversity had rolled now and again over the honest bridlesmith's descendants: leaving them unharmed, it beat about the heads of palaces and towers, razing castles to the ground, from whose ruins new pedestals were built for the setting up of other favourites, who, in their turn, were shaken, many of them, into nonentity, while all this time the quiet family below escaped unscathed. Such was, according to Mr. Brown's own account, the why and wherefore of his own existence. A number of legendary stories and a few detached scraps of family history served to amuse him in his leisure time, when he would recount them with the never-failing zest of unabated interest; which proved that for himself at least, they had a charm beyond anything that could be bought with a price. He had little pride excepting that which was centered in the fact of his having ancestors who had blessed the world in their day with their virtues and their handiwork. Aspiring to nothing beyond his reach, and generally obtaining all to which he aspired, he reaped from the world the sweets of contentment, and threw into it many a seed therefrom that germinated in smiles. He and Abel Armstrong were the most prosperous farmers of the neighbourhood. They were old friends in the truest sense of the term, for they had been friends ever since the time when they

were boys together playing about their fathers' farms : this they often did to the great annoyance of their respective fathers' ponies, then called hobbies.

One or other of the farmers happening to be out about the fields, or on any business afoot, was a sure sign in the holiday time for Sandy or Shovel to be called upon to perform incredible feats of agility for the diversion of the boys, at the imminent risk of life and limb of all three, or four of them, as the case might be. Sandy being occupied in the demure task of carrying Mr. Brown over his fields or to market, was a signal for an outcry for Shovel ; when the poor beast would come forth from his temporary rest, patient and unresisting, to bear the burden of both boys : or if Shovel was about his master's business, then did the weight of the two boys fall remorselessly upon Sandy ; unless he too was engaged at the same time in the more profitable occupation of serving his master. But when, as sometimes happened, both creatures were turned out to graze at the same time, the indefatigable boys were no sooner aware of the fact than the prospect of living in clover was at once cut short for Sandy and Shovel,—Abel and Will would summarily leap upon their backs and challenge each other for a race.

Their parents, gentle and indulgent, did not always choose to open their eyes to these frolics, excepting when Mr. Brown encountered the youths returning from a wild scamper, with the foaming brutes ready to drop at every step : then would his wrath kindle for a moment in behalf of the poor beasts ; but



another look at the boys would touch his indulgent heart, and he would say, "Cum now, my lads, yo' know I canno' bear to see them hobbies put about i' that manner; bring 'em in directly, and help 'em to a mouthful or two o' som'at extra, do!"

Abel's father being scarcely harder-hearted than Will's, the boys had it pretty much their own way; till one day, when as a consequence of the spirit of reform which had seized Mr. Armstrong, an unlucky accident befell them. A high hedge, of remote antiquity, had uninterruptedly engrossed too much of the sunshine until the last year, when that precious commodity proved its value by its scarcity. The hedge having been cut down, was low enough now to tempt the adventurous youths with their unlucky hobbies. Other obstacles as high and difficult they had overcome times out of number; but on this particular day the fates were against them. Abel managed to put Shovel over the hedge; but Will, less expert, came to the ground in pitiful plight. Turning to raise himself on his elbow before Abel had time to get back to his assistance, Will had the mortification of seeing poor Sandy stretched on her side a dozen paces off, when he could think of nothing for the moment but the plunging of the beast under him as he was thrown to the ground. A stout thorn stake, partly torn up by the roots, hung slanting from the hedge, covered with blood. It had pierced the poor brute's chest, and entered deeply into the lungs.

Mr. Brown, being one of those easy souls who

naturally feel an aversion at seeing others irritated, was in the habit of giving a certain piece of proverbial advice to everyone about him in angry mood or in any way violent, and then walking quietly away. The loss of Sandy would be a likely occurrence to put his philosophy to the test—at least so young Abel thought; knowing, as he did, that Mr. Brown loved his animals, and had a special affection for this particular hobby. Abel had often heard his companion's father deliver himself of his usual piece of advice; the only merit of which was, as he considered, that it was sufficiently short for him to have got it by heart, from hearing Mr. Brown repeat it to the people around. Taking it now into his head to try and profit by these sage maxims in his present dilemma, Abel delivered his father's weary beast into the hands of a farm-boy on the road, and went direct with his friend Will to try and smooth matters over at his home as well as might be. Both boys sat for some time in Mr. Brown's large kitchen, without saying anything of the accident;—Will, with a woe-begone expression of countenance, which was only regarded as a sign of fatigue; Abel, shewing a little more discretion in keeping up appearances; but both for a time labouring under the affectation that nothing particular had happened. At length Abel said suddenly, "Eh, Mr. Brown, we just *have* heard a row this afternoon. Old Billson's bull-dog rushed upon Balaam Bentricks and worried his coat all to pieces. Old Balaam did storm out at him above a bit."

"That was a pity," said the unsuspecting Mr. Brown,

"since it would neither mend the coat nor staunch the blood."

"No," returned Abel, "that's what I thought. I often think of your words, Mr. Brown, that 'whatever happens, it's best to abide by it peaceably.'"

"Aye, to be sure it is, lad," said Mr. Brown, with great deliberation. "A calm spirit gives a quiet conscience; and high words are like a fierce wind, that empties the heart of Goodness, and lets in Wickedness to drive away your friends and frighten your digestion."

"Yes," said Abel, "and there's something else you say sometimes; I think I can remember it. 'An ill temper is a fiery furnace, where you forge your own fetters for the fiends to bind you, when they leave you brooding like a bird of prey chained to a rock, with plenty of happiness all about, but not a spark within.'"

"That's it," said Mr. Brown; "I couldn't ha' believed you'd recollected so much. It is a bad thing. I always say so, and I always will say it, and I say it again, it is a bad thing to give way to a bad temper. And that is not all, Abel; the Bible tells us to rule the spirit, and that's what I say; it's better than taking a city any day. Always remember that, my lad, and then you'll come a good deal cleaner out o' th' quagmires o' this world than many people do, and you'll get through the thorny places wi' far less bruising and scratching than most men get, as the scars o' their troubles show on their faces by the time they reach the shady side o' the hill of life."

"Yes," replied Abel, with a rueful countenance,

"but the hedges are the worst, Mr. Brown; when you have to get over them with a stupid brute like old Sandy."

"Why," said Mr. Brown, "surely you lads wouldno' try to make Sandy leap a hedge? because so sure as ever you do such a thing as that, so sure you'll be a brewing mischief, and there'll be some break-neck work afore you've done."

"The worst of it is, Mr. Brown," returned Abel, "we did try, this afternoon; and I'm very sorry—we shall not do it any more; but we staked Sandy, and she's as dead as a door-nail."

"What! do you dare to tell me to my face?" said Mr. Brown, rushing to a corner and seizing his stick, "you wild young scoundrels! that—"

The boys heard no more; they darted out at the door, and were at the other side of the meadow by the time Mr. Brown had reached the threshold with the stick in his hand.

Bill was in great distress of mind, both for the loss of Sandy and the wrath of his father, whom he had never before seen change so suddenly. Neither boy was in a condition to brave it out and then run away, as their first impulse prompted. They no sooner began to deliberate upon that step than both confessed at once to the conqueror within. Having fasted during some six or seven hours' hard exercise in the open air, their hunger was such as only growing boys can feel. Abel was aggravated that his ruse did not succeed. "I tell you what it is," he said, with a face flushed all

over with passion, "your father is a downright mean fellow ; he doesn't act up to his profession ; to go and put himself into such a temper as he did just because that clumsy brute took to her sulks and went and flung herself on that stake. It was only because she was an idle beast, and didn't want to do any more work. She was as big a coward as old Johnny Stapler, and she shall be buried alongside him in the cross roads—a *detestable* old brute ! And your father, he can talk enough about other folks when they kick up a row ; and just see what a fine figure he cuts himself the moment anything's up with him."

"My father is as good as yours," said Will ; "it was enough to make him riled, or anybody else ; and, besides, he liked Sandy better than any horse in the world. I'd give anything, I'd do anything, if I could bring her back to life. But we ought to have told mother—that's what we should ha' done, and then we could ha' got something to eat, and she'd softened him down like ; she knows how to do it, and we don't."

As they wandered about, casting uneasy glances at the house while bemoaning their neglect to invoke Mrs. Brown's sympathies on their behalf, the lady herself appeared at the doorway, beckoning for them to come in.

"I'm sure I'm very sorry, father," Bill began.

"It wasn't Bill's fault, Mr. Brown," interrupted Abel, "it was my fault. I ought to bear all the blame. He wouldn't have dared to take the hedge, but I made him ; and it was a great wonder I didn't stake Shovel

too. I'm very sorry though that it's happened so."

"And I'm very sorry too," said Mr. Brown, whose temper had subsided into a vein of reflection as he sat looking into the fire, while the boys turned their eyes towards the table preparing for supper. "I'm sorry for my poor Sandy's sake. Many and many a long mile has she carried me on her back, in fair weather and in foul—hail, rain, or shine, it was all the same to her; and never through the hottest sun as ever burned, or the heaviest mud of winter—never did a murmur escape that poor creature. I've often thought to myself o' the time when she should have a nice bit o' green swade to enjoy unmolested in her old age; and how I should go and look at her, and think o' the pleasant journeys we've made together. But now its all over, is it? Tell me again, lads, is she really dead?"

"Yes," said Bill, "I wish she wasn't."

"I hope she didn't suffer much?" said Mr. Brown.

"No," said Abel, "I should think the stake must have gone straight into her heart, for when I turned I saw her give one tremendous plunge and a leap, and then she dropped down dead like the snuff of a candle in a moment."

"That's well so far," said Mr. Brown in a sort of soliloquy. "Poor Sandy! I know very well that she wasn't the only hobby in the world. I can buy another, and call it Sandy, if I choose; but I shall never see *her* like again; and no other, so long as I live, can ever take me the same journeys again. She carried me when I was a young man; and somehow," he said,

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drawing his hand across his eyebrows, "she was a part of my young days; and if I couldno' bring old times back again, I could look at her and think o' what's gone by; and she seemed to make all the time alike in that way. I shall feel older now she's gone. Ah, didn't she know my step? She always turned to see if it was the right one when anybody else was standing about; and she was as proud as a peacock when I was on her back. I shall never get another to know me and like me as she did; because I can't like another as I liked her. No! I'll never call another by the name of Sandy. The next shall be Dobbin, or Captain, or some common name like other folks' hobbies. They are all about the same to me now; one's as good as another, so long as it'll answer the purpose o' carrying me about: I don't want to like any other, but I suppose I must have one. I shouldno' ha' gone into a passion wi' you, lads, for I know yo' didno' mean to do what yo' did. I forgot myself for the time."

Neither Mr. Brown's sorrow nor their own penitence interfered with the boys' appetites. After a hearty repast, they expressed themselves as greatly relieved in mind as refreshed in body. But they could not forget their loss as the seasons came and went without the return of any day for a scamper on the ponies.





### CHAPTER III.

#### TO SCHOOL, THEN HOME AGAIN.

Oh Life ! how pleasant is thy morning,  
Young Fancy's rays the hills adorning !  
Cold pausing Caution's lessons scorning,  
    We frisk away  
Like schoolboys at the expected warning,  
    To joy and play.

BURNS.

**A**BEL was a tall, athletic youth ; little likely at this time to induce the suspicion that he carried about him an inherent lymphatic germ calculated to develop into a tranquil placidness of disposition that should eventually raise him above the influences of such cares as are apt to press heavily upon men of more delicate fibre. But so it was. Even after he had attained to middle age, and had experienced his full share of trouble, he only reminded one of a tree towards the end of summer that had known no canker.

As a boy, Abel was the envy of all the other boys for miles around, for his expertness in leaping and swimming, as well as in climbing ; in which exercise he was greatly facilitated by a noted group of trees, called by the villagers the five-stemmed tree. These grew in a meadow, the property of Baalam Bentricks, on the



hedge side of the right-of-way path frequented by the people in taking a short cut to Derby. The five stems grew at such equal distances from each other as to admit the passage of a man sideways, with sufficient centre-space for one to turn oneself round with ease. The trunks had grown almost perpendicularly to a considerable height without foliage, excepting one stout branch some ten or twelve feet high. To this branch Abel would spring like a monkey; then taking another leap he would plunge into the interlacing branches, and begin to whistle gaily as he made his tour round his airy chambers; then, by way of change, he would select a suitable nook, and sit and whistle and sing alternately till the hills echoed again. He was always sure of a companion in a little robin, that invariably came when he was there, and perched itself fearlessly upon a rocking twig close by and answered with his cheery notes as if to welcome the merry intruder. Abel would now and then turn his leafy curtain aside, and survey the hills with eyes as ardent as his limbs, loth to quit the site of so much beauty, till his appetite and the old church clock together struck him suddenly, and he gained the ground as nimbly as he had left it. Then in the evening again he was always ready for a rush among the branches of these trees after his companions were used up with their ordinary day's pastime of work or play. This served with Abel as a safety-valve for the escape of his exuberant strength. But there came a day when it served him in fiercer sport with a formidable enemy.

Abel's strength and courage seldom assumed any of those forms of thoughtless cruelty in which at times these qualities are apt to manifest themselves in other boys similarly endowed. His parents being possessed of a fair competency, and judging from his handsome physique, together with the steady intrepidity of his disposition, that, with a liberal education, he might some day turn out to be, instead of plain Abel Armstrong, like his father, Abel the great something, though what that something was to be they never had the spirit to prophesy. Without any definite end in view, they determined to send him to Blayton, to the Arborvitum School. This preparatory institution was a sort of grand junction between ignorance and erudition, without however manifesting the innocence of the one or the polish of the other.

Like most other schools at that time, whether private or public, the one at Blayton needed reform. The boys took extra license here, from the fact that the schoolroom and dormitory were detached and out of hearing-reach from the master's house. Indeed, the greater proportion of the pupils seemed to have no idea that they had gone there for the purpose of getting an education; they regarded all the law and order forced upon them as mere useless forms, arbitrarily exacted in compliance with the master's whim or caprice. It is questionable whether any "Tom Brown" had ever been there with vigour enough to carry himself unscathed through the abuses of the school, and wit enough eventually to bring those

abuses to light. No master-spirit presided at Arborvitum School. No Doctor Arnold here made the boys feel the weight and value of the mace of iron in velvet sheath, with which that firm and gentle hand ruled the Rugby boys into discipline.

Arborvitum School was a boisterous place when Abel Armstrong became one of its pupils. Many a time in after-life did he revert to the rough usages there, and tell of the manner of his reception. Abel was more verdant than most of the scholars, the greater number of whom had had some previous intimation of the mode of reception, and regarded the process of initiation as a part of the plan of the school not to be shirked or got rid of. Most of them endeavoured to overcome any little temporary infliction they might be visited with in a spirit of emulation, lest any stain of opprobrium should remain upon them as cowards. In order to bear away the palm for valour in this ordeal, it needed that the novice should be for the time stolidly indifferent to all personal inconvenience, and affect to enter into the spirit of the entertainment with as much determination to furnish amusement, as though he were a mere spectator of the sport.

To be successful in winning popularity for the future, the new boy must compliment each of the fellows on his agility or expertness, be very jocose, and roar out with boisterous laughter, even were he almost suffocated; as if he gloried in the fun, and deemed it a privilege to be the centre of attraction. But Abel Armstrong had no friend to

whisper to him the password that would take him through the troubled gate with the least danger to himself. On his first appraisal of the treatment to be enforced he was restive, and began to reject the advance column of the enemy with literally striking marks of his displeasure, when, contrary to his expectations that the boys would clear off, as would have been the case in his native village, the boys at Blayton only hailed him as game, and crowded round him with increased glee to join in the sport. Surrounding and pressing upon him with bolsters until he was almost smothered, each boy in his turn struggled rampant to get the victim down single-handed, while the others baffled his eyes with their bolsters to prevent his escape. Whoever should first succeed in throwing him and walking over him was entitled to a shilling, which the new comer was made to forfeit to the champion. In case of anyone losing his temper and striking with his fist or kicking, such an one was to forfeit sixpence. Any one who had the ill-luck to get a personal disfigurement on the occasion, or to have blood drawn by a blow from the new fellow, forfeited ninepence; such misfortunes being regarded as showing a want of dexterity, besides being a bad omen likely to lead the whole clique into trouble.

Abel's fury knew no bounds at seeing himself hemmed in on all sides. In his raging passion he gave vent to volleys of oaths he had only before heard, but never dreamed of uttering. After struggling for a considerable time, finding his blinded and

imprisoned strength of little avail against thirty-two boys, all more or less practised in their art, he at length quietly resolved to remember the perpetrators ; vowing that if he did escape alive with bones unbroken, he would find out at a future time whether there was such a thing as honour in the place. "If ever there is an open stand-up fight between two only," he thought, "then woe betide this great hulky fellow they call Erasmus."

When Abel had once resigned himself to such meditations, and consequently became somewhat quiet, the best part of the fun for the other boys was over. The fire of their ardour quenched, they soon dispersed, descanting upon the different salient points of their victim, according to the manner in which he received or repelled certain strokes dealt about his 'proboscis,' 'blinkers,' 'bread-basket,' 'canister,' and other portions of his body designated in similar terms familiar only to the initiated. No umpire being voted, to whom appeals could be made in these initiations, some fierce dispute generally arose from them ; and the long and loud altercations which always followed were certain to end in many bruises, and not unfrequently in worse disasters, which, however, were invariably smuggled out of the way of the master.

It could not be said in the midsummer holidays that Abel had made much advance in a learned point of view, though he had received half a year's instruction in a tolerably good school. His parents, however, thought him improved. He could write a fair hand,

had made some progress in the simpler branches of arithmetic, his accent was not quite so broad as when he left home, and his general air was more like that of one who had seen something of the world. In size and strength he had made a great stride; so that altogether he was greatly elevated in the esteem of his old friends and acquaintances.

As scarcely any of the younger portion of the inhabitants of Grayworth had ever been out of its precincts farther than their own legs would carry them, they now looked upon Abel as a person of some importance, as having had the double advantage of travelling and basking in the rays of knowledge, as being, in short, able to reflect some useful light in the way of experience on the more benighted among themselves who aspired to be enlightened.

But those who are most curious to obtain knowledge for the purpose of making a boastful display of it are not always the most apt scholars. This was exemplified in the case of a half-witted youth, the son of the innkeeper of the village. Upon this poor fellow the consequences of Abel's tuition fell heavily, and remains to this day a standing joke in several villages round about. Poor Ben Josison, or Joeson, as the family were afterwards called, meeting and greeting Abel on the third or fourth day after his arrival from Blayton, paid him some compliments respecting his general improvement, and confided to him the secret that he would give everything he was master of if only his father would put him out to school in a large town, where he

might learn to possess himself of certain advantages not obtainable in Grayworth. Ben went on to explain that he was most anxious to be informed upon those subtleties of art, by the acquisition of which one boy can out-wit another in cunning if he fail in courage. Complaining sadly about some insults which he and his companions were subjected to from certain idlers who strolled over from Derby about once a week to amuse themselves by throwing coarse facetiæ at the village folk, Ben poured out his complaints, saying, "Them puffed up Derby folks are sich a conceited set o' jackdaws, they reckon theirselves cock o'th' walk when they cum to hev a stare at Gray'th, dressed up o' Sundays as fine as ducks, a swaggering wi' their hands i' their breeches pockets as if they'd got a few happence and were afeard we were a goin to steal 'em. I'd feight all the lot on 'em I would, only I'm afeard they'd hurt me. I only wish I'd a chance to learn a trick or tew like some folks as I've heard tell on, I'd let them gret hulks see, that I would, whether they dare to cum and make a laughing stock o' us, a tellin us as they do as we starve t'weather cock on t'top o'th' church steeple, just because they made silly Simon believe as it wor a real cock up there; and now they allers cum and throw some barley on th' ground and look up at th' cock and call it, and crow at it, and giggle at us as if we were fools and good for nout but to be played wi'; like as if we were all monkeys i'th' place o' purpose for them jackasses to cum and look at wi'out paying for. Now, its a great shame, Abel, and

I know you could sarve 'em out if you'd a mind to. I only wish you'd show me some of th' tricks as you learnt where you've been. Now you've been all the way to Blayton all this while, yo ought to know a trick or tew."

With all Ben's indignation at the credulity of simple Simon, he himself was not very far in advance of that poor soul in mental capacity. His own progenitors not having been invigorated by fresh kinds of grafting stock since time out of mind, from the fact that the different branches of the family had generally intermarried, by reason of a parsimonious propensity as a standard centre which usually attracted the different members, and kept them from straying after the more extravagant of the world in search of partners. At the present time the best samples of the family could not be considered very bright specimens of humanity, while in the case of poor Ben, though nature had not been niggardly in the quantity of brain, yet she seemed to have mutated it to the quality of a soft sort of fruit, of that innocent flavour which is neither sweet, sour, nor bitter, nor, as far as was discernible, of any particular use.

Yet Ben Joeson's was by no means the lowest form of imbecility. Abel readily saw a good joke for himself by taking advantage of the poor fellow's confiding simplicity. He told him with a mysterious air that he *would* show him a trick or two if he would accompany him to "Stony Hommock," where stood a perpendicular jagged old tooth of a rock, bare and



rough. Ben assented with glee. Having arrived at the summit of the "Hommock," Abel placed the back of his right hand against it, directing Ben to go about thirty yards away, and, from a spot indicated, to rush with his doubled fist and strike with all his might at his open palm. Ben obeyed gleefully: doubling his fist, and putting on the highest pressure of speed he could muster, he came with all his force against what he expected would be Abel's hand, but which as a matter of course was snatched away on the instant of Ben's approach. The result was, that his unfortunate fist came in violent contact with the rock. He smashed his knuckles horribly. Pursing his mouth up, and drawing a woefully long inspiration, he raised his benumbed hand, slowly and with an effort, and wrung it heavily towards the ground to shake off the unwelcome blood that was beginning to flow, as he ejaculated with grave satisfaction, "Oh, my eye, Abel! is that it?" Looking up at the same time as suddenly as his psychological powers permitted, he saw Abel's face ready to break out at the mouth with bottled-up fun, which, however, he innocently took to be an approving smile.

It was too bad on the part of Abel; but it must be allowed he was at a very thoughtless age. Moreover he did not deliberately go to work with the intention of causing any injury to poor Ben: listening to his doleful recital, his own measure of humour began to fill up till it fairly overflowed, and with that active love of mischief which is irrepressible in such a nature

as his at such an age, he could not resist the temptation to try and find out for himself how far Ben's own credulity would lead him. After seeing him take his punishment with so much fortitude, Abel nodded his head, while half turning his face away to conceal his merriment: "There, Ben," he said, "that's the way to serve the Derby loons."

Ben was enraptured at the thought; though still wringing his maimed hand and raising it gently with the help of the other, he looked proudly at his raw knuckles, as if he were reading in them the certain sign of future victory over his troublesome adversaries. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "my eye, Abel! that is a good un: mind you tell nobody about it, and I'll serve 'em out now, *that* I will, you see if I don't: that is a good trick, that is. I know'd you'd learnt a trick or tew at Blayton." He drew from his pocket his red and yellow silk handkerchief, which in a general way being regarded by him as a sort of pet ensign that distinguished him from the labouring classes, he rather displayed as an ornament than used; now, however, he brought it into active service: wrapping it round his wounded hand, he walked down the hill, with a mixture of pride and resignation in his steps, fondly cherishing the satisfaction of having learnt something available for the achievement of a much-desired object.

Abel's better nature would have conquered his most lively inclination for practical jokes, could he have foreseen the predicament into which his tuition eventually drifted poor Ben, when that young gentle-

man went out into the world, alone as it were, without a friend to guide him in the carrying out of his dearly bought experience to a practical issue. Strolling in the fields about a week afterwards, while his knuckles were still smarting, Ben encountered several of those loungers who had been so inimical to his peace of mind. Feeling sure that he was now sufficiently well armed to pay off the long-standing score of grudges against them at one grand stroke, after a good deal of banter from the other side, which was not dealt in the choicest language, but was effective in stirring up strife, he boldly constituted himself the champion of the village in announcing his consent to try his hand upon them, declaring that he would 'whack' any one of them, providing that they would allow him the privilege of choosing his own manner of attack, which important measure, however, he divulged, in his impatience, too early. He defied them in his rash excitement, and boldly challenged one of their number to rush with his double fist and strike his own open hand. But he seemed the next instant to be groping in some vague doubt that the preparations were not quite complete. It was the *rock* that he missed. In vain did he look round as he tried to call to mind what it was that he wanted. The place where they stood being an open field, furnished no clue to his wandering memory. Failing to call to mind in his enthusiasm that his nose was a vulnerable promontory, he placed his hand on that susceptible organ in lieu of the rock ; when his adversary, seeing

there was nothing to fear, made a terrific rush ; and Ben, pseudo-pupil as he was, having sufficient presence of mind to snatch away his hand—but never being able to grasp more than one idea at once, his whole mental forces being now brought to bear strictly upon the proper guidance of that one part of his person—exposed his unlucky nose to such an onslaught as drove all the sense he was generally master of entirely out of his head.

The beetle-browed biped who thus felled poor Ben senseless to the ground, discovering that his victim showed no signs of life excepting that of a copious flow of blood from the horribly-disfigured nose, whistled for his low-lived mangy-looking dog, that was sniffing about the edges of the water after rats, coolly clinched with his teeth his short black pipe, an appendage considered by no means gentlemanly at that time, and hinted to his honourable companions that the best thing they could do was to take themselves off without delay ; a mode of procedure to which they were no strangers.

These valiant combatants, judging it prudent to withdraw from the scene of action, left their wounded adversary on the field in a very precarious state, which in all human probability would have proved fatal but for timely assistance, without which—according to the opinion given afterwards by Doctor Perry—the poor fellow must have lost his life in a very few minutes through asphyxia.

Ben's tutelary genius, Abel Armstrong, being a prodigious ranger of the fields, was out at the time, as

usual, enjoying all that was enjoyable, from the lovely wild thyme nestling in the bosom of the bank, to the high cerulean arch above, with a lively love for all things. He could hardly have been out of hearing distance when the catastrophe occurred which brought his confiding novice so low; as he was on the spot a few minutes later, viewing the prostrate body with pity and astonishment. Not having the slightest clue as to how Ben had managed to get himself into so deplorable a condition, Abel accounted for it to himself by supposing that the poor fellow must have been encountered by Baalam Bentricks' bull, a bloodthirsty and savage beast, the terror of all the old women and children, as well as of some of the men of the neighbourhood. Before Abel had come to this conclusion, however, he had, after the manner of Falstaff with the corpse of Hotspur, but with less puffing and blowing, taken upon himself the heavy burden of poor Ben's helpless body, and carried it for some distance; the "Richard the Third," Ben's home, being only a five-acre field from the place of disaster, Abel made his way with as much speed as the circumstances permitted, and carefully deposited his load upon a large 'squab,' a rude sort of wooden sofa in the kitchen of the inn.

Ben's mother loved him more than any of her children. He needed more protection, and always had the tenderest care apparently *because* he needed it: moreover his deficiency was in some measure compensated for by extraordinary gentleness and docility. With much alarm on her part and a great deal of

agitation among the rest of the family, the doctor was sent for. In the meantime, Abel, who was always practical and sound to the core, remembering how his mother had set to work with his sister when she had been tossed, made them procure cold water, which he used unsparingly, and by calmly selecting such things as he thought might be efficacious from the offerings of some half dozen smelling bottles, quantities of vinegar, and several bottles of brandy tendered to him by half-a-dozen anxious female hands, he had succeeded at the moment of the doctor's arrival in bringing the sufferer to a dull yet dawning sense of his state and whereabouts. Doctor Perry, always bustling in his manner, was at this time a very young practitioner, having suddenly stepped into responsibility by the untimely death of his father. His quick footsteps were heard from behind the wooden screen as he entered in his usual way. Perceiving at a glance, in the broken nose and swollen eyes and cheeks, the sign, as he thought, of a brutal quarrel, he exclaimed in his rapid manner of repetition, "What, what, what is all this? How comes this about? How comes this about?" No answer came from Ben. His helpless head lay passive as an infant's upon the stout breast and strong arm of Abel, who, with his right hand was gently bathing the face, washing the sponge in fresh supplies of water brought in huge wooden bowls, which the mother in her flurry changed again and again without the water having been used, seeming to fancy that the oftener she ran backwards and forwards the sooner would her son be healed.

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Abel began to explain to the doctor the state in which he had found Ben, giving his own reasons for his conjectures that he had been tossed. Not being much fonder of Baalam than he was of his beast, and reckoning that he owed both of them a heavy grudge, Abel called the powers to witness that if that bull were not put out of the way very soon, he would give such a thrashing either to the master or the beast that either he or his antagonist, whichever it might be, should not be left with unbroken skin.

This threat was made in such a deliberate tone, with such evident meaning in it, that Ben, who had hitherto uttered no sound beyond a sigh, seemed to wake up to the feeling that it meant danger; trembling for his friend's safety, he burst into tears and blubbered out as plainly as he could speak, "Pray donno' try to feight yon bull; if thee do I'm sure he'll do for thee."

The effort was too much. The poor fellow fainted again. The blood began to trickle down the roof of his mouth into the throat to the great danger of his choking. After a good deal of exertion on the part of his friends, he was restored so far as to be able to obey the doctor's injunctions not to speak at present, but to follow his directions with regard to the use of some mixture which should be sent forthwith. Ben's disfigurement was such that no one would have recognised him; his eyes were closed up and the whole of the face and forehead swelled to monstrous proportions. Abel would not leave him until he was somewhat better: besides being rather anxious about his state,

he was curious to get at the whole truth of the matter. He waited an hour or so ; then seeing Ben swallow a little gruel mixed with some stimulant, and finding that he was in a fair way of recovery, Abel shewed a degree of tact that would have done credit to an experienced nurse. Supporting the patient comfortably, he told him that he might speak now very low, and tell them how he came to be so hurt. As Ben, in broken and disconnected syllables, gradually revealed the true state of the case, Abel became almost overwhelmed with remorseful pity. Had Ben not been so much injured, Abel would most likely have boxed his ears for his stupidity. But the affair having taken so serious a turn, he could not forgive himself his indulgence in a joke that had resulted so badly. Feeling that he alone was to blame, he was almost overcome for the moment by honest emotions of grief. He only answered very gently by saying, in the dialect of the place, which seemed more affectionate than the cold correct way of speaking that he had learned at school, "Why, lad, thou shouldst-no' try to feight, thou'rt not able to feight by thee sen ; and thee mun promise me that if thee want to whack anybody in future, to cum and tell me about it, and I'll let 'em see, depend upon it, lad."

This was better than medicine to Ben. He knew that he could rely on Abel's word, and he believed his strength to be invincible. He thoroughly believed now that he should soon see his Derby enemies thrashed clean off the field. But whether they had taken fright



or not at his appearance was never ascertained. Be that as it may, they never troubled Grayworth again, nor had poor Ben the pleasure of seeing them beaten.

But the memory of old injuries was revived in Abel : revenge on the bull had taken deep root in his breast. He reasoned that if it were not the cause of this evil it might have been : his own sister and several other persons had been hurt by it, and his resolve to be revenged on the foe was a matter not easily to be uprooted from his determination.

The end of the vacation came round, and Abel was sent to Blayton again. But his heart was not in his studies. In every kind of sport he was soon among the foremost. His forte lay in rambling, roving, fishing, foraging, bird-nesting, tree-climbing, hedge-leaping, foot-racing, taking small streams with long poles, and exploring anything and everything within the possibility of access ; and though it was not his practice to go about squaring his fists at every boy he met, he never objected to fighting when there was a reasonable chance of his doing it fairly. The most unlucky of his adversaries was Erasmus Bigmy, son of Squire Bigmy, of Bolderford. Abel remembered this boy from the first night of his entrance into the school, when he himself, without a single friend, was baffled and beaten on all sides with the force of the whole school against him ; and marking him as his most unrelenting persecutor, he never afterwards suffered him to escape unpunished when he learned of any particular act of his tyranny over the lesser boys.

Alas! now, for poor Bigmy, Abel found many opportunities, which he considered legitimate, of putting the threat he then made into execution.

With all Abel's capabilities, he made but little progress in learning. Writing was tedious to him. He managed to acquire a little book-knowledge by studious application, but anything sedentary was distasteful to him. His lessons bored him. He showed no aptitude for languages, nor skill in the higher branches of arithmetic. He longed to be at home on his father's farm again, to range over the old haunts free and unbidden, like a child of Nature as he was. But that was not to be just yet. His parents persisted in thinking Grayworth too small for him, so that when he went home for the Christmas holidays, it was with the understanding that he was to return again. He was in his fifteenth year, tall and lithesome for his age, his general bearing and his figure being several years in advance of those of the other youths about him of the same age.

All the people in his native place were pleased to see his cheery face again at Christmas. In their simple mode of life they were unaccustomed to many changes, and regarded Abel's return to the village with something like the feeling of pride and pleasure with which people who live in towns regard the advent of a popular movement. As everybody in Grayworth knew everybody else in Grayworth, as a matter of course everybody in Grayworth knew young Abel Armstrong. All had more or less an indefinite feeling that he was

an ornament to the place; all loved and honoured him, from the hard-handed labourer up to the rector and the squire. Many among them, even of the poorest, would not rest satisfied on his return from school until he had eaten and drunk with them. "What news hast thou brought for us fro' Blayton?" was the general cry after the first salutation was over. One neighbour would make him come in and have a hot apple dumpling or a pasty; another insisted on his partaking of some roasted potatoes, and a third would make him promise to come in to-morrow at twelve o'clock and eat some fresh-water fish with them; all of which Abel amply repaid from his own net. Thus he went the whole round of his old acquaintances. It was not that he fared sumptuously with any of them; but no guest at my Lord Mayor's dinner was ever happier than Abel was on these occasions. It afforded his neighbours real pleasure to see him sit in their own houses at ease with them while telling of the things he had seen and heard. His presence was like sunshine to them; his own heart was full of the joy of social pleasure as he chatted to the little ones and their mothers, asking how Johnny was getting on at the shoemaking, how little Tubal was doing in the blacksmith's shop, whether Annie knew how to sew yet, and if Mary was grown a young woman. The big babies and their little feet were examined and eulogised; the fun they all had together in the hay carts last year acted as mirth-seed sown to come up again and furnish an exhaustless stock of fresh fun for

to-day. Love and friendship were helped here with a score of little incidents, simple enough in themselves, the like of which many aspiring youths in towns or cities would think beneath their notice, but which, for those of simpler habits, gild many a flying moment with a lustre never to be forgotten, and leave impressions on the mind which memory stores up as her brightest jewels to serve in future as treasures of retrospect, collateral consolation to fall back upon in the darkest hours of adversity.

Abel was no philosopher, but, as he used to say himself as he grew older, he knew that time was fleeting; and whether from his nature or his creed, or both, he always chose to guard against losing its joys by making himself and others miserable through small annoyances about small things: he lived as happy as he could by being and by doing good.





## CHAPTER IV.

### THE FARMER'S POULTRY AVENGED.

If there's a hole in a' your coats  
I rede you tent it ;  
A chiel's amang you taking notes,  
And, faith, he'll prent it.

BURNS.

HERE was blended with Abel's good qualities a certain love of mischief ; through which, when at Grayworth, he was often judged as being at the head of a number of boys who were altogether now and then found missing. His precedents, however, gave most of the villagers confidence in his discretion ; and whenever it happened that a troop of the boys had suddenly made a simultaneous exit, it was generally concluded in the minds of the parents to be pretty certain that the renegades were out on some expedition with Abel, either for the purpose of paying off some ruffian for foul play, or to put down some public annoyance. But his large vein of drollery could not always be kept strictly within the line marked out by a certain small number of individuals, who, in their mild sympathy,

could not forbear remarking that Abel went a little too far in the practical joke he played upon an old curmudgeon in the neighbourhood known by the name of Judas Jenkins. This Judas, with his wife, were a mean old couple, who lived principally on the produce of a milking cow, which, though everyone guessed *whence* it was fed, nobody knew exactly *how*.

Inhabiting a wayside old tumble-down hovel, that stood mid-way between the village and the town, the old couple found themselves fortunately situated for the fodder of the one and the custom of the other. They were never known to buy any provender, but always to have a larger quantity of milk to sell at Derby than any farmer in the village ever got from any one cow. Abel, like several others, knew pretty well how to account for this, as also for certain small losses sustained by the different farmers from time to time not without considerable irritation and annoyance. Though no one had ever caught either of the old couple in the act of marauding, yet every one suspected them of making regular predatory excursions. One and another of the farmers had at different times been roused in the night by the barking of the dogs; and on looking out of their chamber windows had more than once seen a form, well known to be human, skulking about the hedges, strongly suspected to be either Judas or his wife in disguise. Though keen search had repeatedly been made, the form had always escaped like a witch.

Abel Armstrong and his bosom friend, Bill Brown,

held what the former termed a consultation about the matter. Abel proposing, seconding, and carrying everything, argued that as the wicked old pair were so fond of losing their night's rest for their own profit, it was fair that for once they should lose it for his pleasure. He stated his determination to serve them out by hook or by crook—that if hook failed, he would succeed in giving them just one good rousing up by crook. After a very lively and somewhat lengthened altercation upon the subject, a plan was agreed upon for waking old Judas and his wife up on some uncomfortable night in a most uncomfortable manner. The scheme was to be carried out upon the first favourable opportunity that should offer.

The opportunity was not long in offering itself. It was in January, at night,—half-past eight o'clock. Already the Grayworth lights were extinguishing one after another from the little latticed windows, as rapidly as the twinkling stars are effaced by driving clouds. Eight o'clock was reckoned bed-time. Nine was considered late. Any one who chose to go and look up the long irregular village mid-time between the two hours might have seen the rushlights pop out as quickly, one after another, as if the curfew-bell had just tolled. At nine o'clock all was darkness; and Grayworth, that rose at five in the morning, often earlier, was now in its first sound sleep.

Abel's vitality was yet quite brisk; though the other members of the family were preparing for rest, which they were quite ready to welcome. His mother and

sisters had just retired to their rooms when he opened the house door to take one last peep at the frosty moonlight night before turning in reluctantly, as he often did, with his strength yet fresh upon him.

"Why," he exclaimed, "there's quite a heavy fall of snow."

The moon, though at the full, had been but hazy in the early part of the evening; it was now quite hidden behind the gathered mists, and the quiet snow was falling rapidly and fast thickening on the ground. The panels of the lower part of the door, as Abel opened it, were distinctly seen moulded in pure white lines of the drifted snow; so much had fallen within the last two hours, while Mrs. Armstrong and her daughters had been carding and spinning by the fireside, and Abel the elder had been smoking his pipe and listening to the ideas of perspective improvements suggested by Abel the younger, who sat wiling away the time, made dear to his mother and sisters by his recounting in odds and ends of conversation the better part of the day's incidents and adventures: a time when they usually chatted and laughed at their work, as they had done on this evening, while he had warmed his feet in the laziest fashion by an enormous fire of wood and coal.

"Well, here's a go," he said, as he still stood looking out at the snow with the door in his hand. "Why, if it keeps on at this rate till morning, we shall all be blocked up; and how will old Judas get out to carry his milk-and-water to Derby?" Abel had forgotten the vow he had made concerning old Judas until the



moment, never dreaming that the snow would fall on that evening ; when the mention of his name brought the idea vividly to his mind. Quick as a lamplighter he rushed into the house, but as quiet as death, lest he should disturb his mother. He drew on his boots, seized hold of a large drab-coloured garment, something between a coat and a cloak, that had done much service : throwing it about him, he said in low hurried tones for his father's ears only, looking at the same time brim full of fun : "Look here, father ; I mean to go out. I've promised to do a little job for somebody on the first night suitable for it ; so don't ask me not to go, because I'm just in the nick of time. Mother needn't know anything about it. It's such a lark, father ; that's all : be sure you keep dark about it and don't let mother and the lasses know but what I'm a' bed. We are going to serve old Judas a trick. Don't split upon us if you hear of it to-morrow. It's all right, you know. I shall not wake you up if I can help it. There's no occasion for you to lock the door. I can come in quietly when I am ready. There's nothing to fear. Good night, father."

Shutting the door quietly and firmly behind him, Abel left his father somewhat puzzled, though not at all alarmed.

Abel was again in his favourite element, the open air. Everything around him was so still that, had it not been for the snow on the ground, his footsteps on the bare earth might have been heard at the other end of the village. The usual stillness of this hour at

Grayworth was only the common pause from labour, the rest that renews and refreshes : yet the intense silence, unbroken now even by Abel's own footfall, gave to the place the air of a sacred necropolis, and caused a feeling of awe to creep over him, as if he were about to visit a grave at midnight ; so hushed and death-like was the first untroubled sleep of the village. Abel *felt* all this rather than thought it. He did not stop to contemplate. After the first shudder he shook off the unked feeling that had crept over him, and bounded off to find his inseparable companion and confidant, Bill Brown.

Bill had not been on the alert. Being utterly ignorant of the copious fall of snow, he had gone to bed a few minutes before Abel arrived at his domicile, and was now in a sound sleep, oblivious alike of the splendid opportunity that was coming down in shining white clusters to serve their mischievous intentions, and of Abel's eager readiness to avail himself of it.

Seeing no light about Mr. Brown's premises, Abel threw up a little snow-ball at Bill's window. But it was not a little of anything at that time of the night that would awaken him. Bill did not sleep by halves : his sleep was that of one who rises early and lives and labours in the open air. After Abel had stood coaxing and trying to hint of his presence as quietly as possible through the windows, till he was cold and out of patience, he bethought himself of a ladder that commonly stood at the corner of one of the barns. He brought it, raised and mounted it, then with his

thumb and finger he raised the lead surrounding one of the little latticed panes of glass, took out the pane, inserted his hand in the aperture, unclasped the hasping, and was in the room by his friend's bedside before he made himself heard. He gave Bill a heavy lunge that almost turned him over. "Bill," he said, in a low but emphatic voice, with his hand upon the shoulder of the sleeper, "I say, Bill! don't kick up any row; wake up, Bill."

Bill began to throw his arms about before he could well open his eyes: "What the deuce is up, Abe! is it a fire?"

"No! fire, no, it's me, Bill; you lazy hound! get up and come along to old Judas."

"Why, what do you mean?" said Bill, gaping. "Is he bad?"

"No, bad! not he, come! look alive and put yourself into something warm. Come on! it's almost a foot deep in snow a'ready, look! don't you see? capital chance. They're all a bed and fast asleep by this time."

"Bother old Judas," said Bill, loth to turn out; "I wish he'd been at kingdom come before he'd woke me out o' my warm sleep."

"It wasn't him, it was me that woke you up; he'd rather you kept a bed and asleep, *I'll* warrant, if he'd had his choice. Come, make haste! it's getting cold."

"*Cold!*" grumbled Bill, "I should rather think it is."

"Well," urged Abel, "be quick then, and muffle yourself up well, *you'll* feel none of the cold then."

The pair of them descended into the farm-yard by way of the window and ladder. It had now ceased snowing, and the air was getting clearer.

"Well, it isn't quite so cold as I thought it was," said Bill, when they were clear of the dwellings, and fairly out at a brisk rate on the high road.

"It's a *beautiful* night," said Abel; "it's a shame to be a-bed such a night as this."

Bill, who was not quite restored to his equanimity, said that for his part he had rather be in his warm bed; and as to the night being fine, he declared sententiously that it was as dark as pitch.

"What a fib," said Abel, "it's only a little cloudy; the mist's all cleared off long ago, and the moon's up at the full."

"Perhaps it is," said Bill, "but it's only a guess, I can't see it, neither can you."

"Why," said Abel, "you must be a great mooney yourself, to talk like that. It would be so dark that you couldn't see your hand before you if it were not for th' moon. I believe I can see old Judas's hovel now," he said, peering his head forward. "There it is! that's it."

At sight of this Bill brightened up. He, like Abel, was pretty well aware that either the old fellow they were about to visit or his wife were in the habit of going about disguised at night to rob the farms and henroosts; though it could not be brought clearly against them: and to be able to upset them on one of the nights which, on account of inauspicious weather,

they chose to devote to innocent repose, was a species of revenge, the very prospect of which electrified Bill's whole frame and made him literally jump for joy.

"Now then," said Abel, as they approached the place, "here's loads of snow: let us pile it up to th' top o' th' old bogey's door."

They set to work in high glee to bring up huge quantities of snow against the crazy old door. In a few minutes it was effectually blocked up. How ardently they enjoyed the work. How light was the labour to their young limbs. How exhilarating to their spirits. The general on a battle-field opposed to the most formidable ranks would find splendid chances in his favour if only he could manage to infuse into his army such nerve and ardour as these two Grayworth boys exhibited on this occasion. Judas's doorway had become in the course of a few minutes a mere snow-mound. It shone strangely bright through the changing light of the sailing clouds as a flitting shadow of a passing cloud would pause now and then darkly upon it, when it seemed to take the appearance of some dim form slowly retiring into the wall for a moment, like a hooded goblin. Then a pale cold light, as the clouds opened, would clothe it in new white and make it seem to be gliding out again, like a stern spectre advancing to rebuke them for disturbing the peace.

Both Abel and Bill began to feel that they were engaged in rather a solemn piece of business; neither of them would confess it at the time, though they

have often done so since. Having no scruples of conscience, however, they soon overcame all disposition to show the white feather; and being well warmed with their work, they plunged into the fun again as heartily as ever. This time they set to work with a will to the window. They stealthily padded to and fro, and gathered and heaped the untrodden snow, till the dilapidated old window was all covered up with a mantle of virgin whiteness.

All means of egress for the old couple were now cut off, excepting the small window—some eight or nine feet above—of the room where they slept. Upon this window the two youths had taken care to keep a scrutinous eye.

"All's safe and sound," said Abel. "Come on, and let us get a turnip or two."

They were not long in finding what they wanted and in cutting them in small pieces. Then going round to the shepherd's pump, the same that supplied the old couple with water, the boys stuffed the pump spout with all the turnips they could cram into it.

Hitherto all their enjoyment had been in anticipation. Now commenced the exquisite pleasure of storming at the bed-room window and noisily awakening the inmates; whom they almost frightened out of their wits.

The old man nervously unfastened the hasp of his window and cautiously put out the red tassel, then by degrees a little more of his red knitted nightcap, as he called out in a tremulous voice, "Who's there?"

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"Travellers," answered Abel in an assumed voice. "What a sleepy-headed fellow you must be, not to have heard the noise. Here's your cow a-choking with a piece o' turnip in her throat. Why don't you come down and see to it?"

"Oh dear, oh dear," said the old man in a dolorous key.

"Dear heart o' me," the old woman cried out; "here we've bin fast asleep and my poor Collin p'raps a-dyin'."

Every word was heard distinctly by the young rebels below; for the window was very ricketty, rags and stout paper having been made to do service whenever accident or the weather diminished the quantity of the glass.

"I say, dame," said Judas, "where's t' flint and steel? I canno' find 'em nowhere."

"I put 'em on t' big box," said his wife.

"Thee canst-no' be doin' nowt but o' tellin' a confounded lie," returned her loving husband.

"Yo' stupid old ass," the old woman shrieked out, "here it is all t' time."

They had got it between them from somewhere. Click! Click! Click! It was the old woman who struck for a light. Abel and Bill saw from the road the flabby whitey-brown frill of her cap, as a ghastly glimmer of light revealed her weird face inflated by blowing the spark into sufficient life to ignite a match by. But something was wrong: the old couple mumbled and grumbled at each other for about

twenty minutes. Judas said the tinder was damp. His dame asseverated that it was dry as a bone, that the matches were at fault, that there was not enough brimstone on them. No, it was no such thing; it *was* the tinder. Then it was not the right sort of rag that the tinder was made from: one said it was not burnt well: the other said it was more likely overburnt. The blessings they invoked for each other during this colloquy afforded the most amusing entertainment to the two youngsters outside, though it is not worth while to enumerate all the pious wishes of the happy couple.

All this while the young aspirants below were convulsed with laughter. They rolled and twisted themselves into every conceivable contortion with the very effort of determining to see the act through without exposing the secret of its author. Every now and then one of them would run over the quiet snowy ground to a safe distance, and beckon the other to inform him that he should die o' laughing; when the other would answer by saying that he was certain he should split if the old fogies continued to go on in that way much longer; each declaring over and over again to the other that he could not stand it much longer, for his sides must crack.

At length, one end of the thin tallow dip being effectually lighted, the upper chamber was immediately vacated. Then came a moment of suspense. Not the faintest shimmer shone athwart the darkness from the window below as the old couple descended



the steep old warped staircase. The young scapegraces outside almost wished now, in their eager curiosity to observe what was going on within, that they could withdraw the opaque obstruction they had set up against the window. But it was now too late to think of it : so they listened intently to the old man unbolting his door and giving orders to his better half to light a fire and get plenty of hot water ready, in case they might need it for the cow.

"Why, how this fool of a door does stick," exclaimed Judas, as he grunted and tugged to get it open : but when he had succeeded in opening it, what was his horror and surprise. "Why ! this looks like—like !—whatever is it ? Snow ! Show a light here, dame. Oh Lord, we're buried alive !"

"Oh ! Lord, help us," screamed out the old woman. "What's to become o' our poor souls if we die i' this manner, wi'out even seeing a minister ?"

After a few more amazed and solemn ejaculations, she meekly begged of her husband to resign himself : "Cum," she said, "and kneel down, Judas ; and tell us some o' them nice things as t' ould missis used to talk about out o' t' big ould Bible."

"Do thee go to Halifax, wi' thee," returned the hardened old man. "What's to become o' us, I should like to know, if th' cow's left i'th' shed to die ? *That's* what I want to know."

"Naybut, my lad," she whined, "and what signifies t' cow if we're all buried alive ? We shall niver want nothing to eat no more i' this world. Oh ! Lord, oh ! Lord, what *shall* we do."

Judas was still tugging and trying to cut for himself a way through the condensed army of snow-flakes that besieged his domicile, as his wife cried out, in a sing-song tone, "Nay, my lad, dono' thee iver let it be said at t' day o' judgment that thee tried to feight against Providence. If it's t' Lord's will, it'll be done. T' ould missis used to say as ther's a pinted time for every one. We've got to die, and our time's cum afore we're ready : and me as is so wicked ; what *shall* I do, what *shall* I do ? But it's all through them brutes at Grayworth as have got so much they canno' eat it all theirselves : I wish they'd been a hundred mile away afore they tempted me wi' their good things to go stealing their hay and their corn and their chickens and things, sending a poor body to the bottomist pit headlong. And that sucking pig o' farmer Brown's to go and turn all green afore we could finish eatin' of it ; I know it wor a judgment on us, Judas ; and this is a flood o' snow, and we're so wicked we wor'nt sent into th' ark o' mercy for safe keepin : it's all no use now. Oh dear, oh dear !" and she groaned aloud.

Judas did not give up quite so readily ; but on going to reconnoitre at the window, he cried out in a terrified voice,

"Why, Lord o' mercy ; I believe it *is* a flood o' snow."

He returned to his task at the door-place again : but it was no light feathery fall that lay there ; nor could a trifling effort disperse it : it was a densely-

packed mass, the adhesion and gravitation of which served alike to enhance the purpose of the youths and balk the efforts of the old man : the temperature was just at the point at which the weight of the snow would be increased every minute beyond that of its ordinary bulk : added to this was the pressure it sustained from the enthusiastic youths ; so that altogether Judas found himself in a very awkward quandary. He laboured and stamped and swore, to the horror and distraction of his penitent wife ; till at length his good genius suggested to him that he might attempt an escape from the windows above, and at least endeavour to save his own life, if his cow were destined to be buried alive in the snow.

Speaking as if he felt greatly relieved, he addressed his wife—without, however, showing any regard to her pious offerings for her soul—"I say, dame ; cum on and follow me. I'm going to get out o' t' chamber window ; and do thee ould thee tongue, and jump after me, and I'll try to catch thee ; but if thee'rt such a fool as to go and break thee neck, dono' thee blame me for't, that's all."

"Aye," she exclaimed gratefully, "aven't I got t' best husband as iver lived ? I wouldno' change him for th' first lord o' t' land. Only to think o' him savin' my life. Eh, to think as I should iver ha' lived to see this day," and her grateful tones died away, doubtless on the staircase.

At the moment when Judas opened the window, and was boldly preparing for a leap, "the inconstant

moon" had just slipped from behind a cloud, and suddenly revealed to him that the mounds of snow, being situated just how and as they were, must have been helped there by mortal hands. He put himself in a terrible rage. His wrath fell heavily on his poor wife. He called her a canting old hypocrite, and dared her at her peril to disobey him whenever he should choose to send her foraging for fodder or fowls.

The old woman besought her partner to remember that they had much to be thankful for that their lives were spared, and told him most obediently that she would do anything he wished, if only he would not swear so dreadfully and bump her about so much.

Judas seeming to perceive that he had not many other friends in the world, turned and clung to his old mate, who had served him, if she had not loved him, for half a century. "Well, then, ould lass," he said, "thee shouldstno' aggravate me so, and then I shouldno' hit thee. Thou'rt the best friend I've got after all; and I love thee well enough yet, though thou'rt sadly altered sin' I fust seen thee fifty year ago a carryin' a couple o' milk pails wi' thee bonny bare arms at farmer Biglofts."

"Ah," sighed the old woman, "that's all gone by now. But I say, Judas, what's to become o' us if t' poor cow's dead?"

"I dono' know, wench, whether it isno' a lie all of a lump; but whether it is or no, do thee go down and get some hot water ready, for fear we may want it; and I'll get out o' t' window somehow or other

and shovel some o' this snow away that them Tom fools, whoever they are as put it there, 'ave bin and heaped up i' this fashion."

"Nay! but, Judas, dono' thee call names," said the old woman. "I'm sure I care for nowt if t' cow isno' dead; do thee go and see about her, and then cum and warm theesen if her's all safe and right."

At this juncture Abel and Bill, who had been hiding under the wall round the corner, listening and gesticulating to each other in unmitigated satisfaction, had enjoyed the joke to their heart's content, and now deemed it the best policy to make off. Taking a circuit from the back of the old house, they rapidly left the ground behind them and found themselves at the crossing where they were to part for their respective homes long before they had found time to recount to each other the most prominent incidents in the little comedy suited to their mutual merriment and self-gratification.

Abel slept that night with one eye open, to be in readiness for the morning. He awoke his father earlier than usual by tapping at his door and asking him to dress and come down, as he had reasons to believe that the hen-roosts were in danger. He resorted to this stratagem in order to lead his father away from the rest of the family and keep them in ignorance of his real motive. Abel longed to know how old Judas would go on at milking time, when the moment should come for him to make up his quantity at the pump — which they facetiously designated

"Judas's best cow." Abel related to his father the circumstances of the siege, and told him how he and young Brown had come by auricular proof to know of the guilt of the old couple in the suspected business of provision-lifting; and father and son took their way towards the old man's dwelling.

There was Judas, not far from his hovel, groping about with his lantern in his hand. "Is that you, Judas?" the senior Armstrong called out.

"I suppose it is," said Judas; "I dono' see nobody else about here just now; I should only like to catch 'em."

The farmer affected not to hear the answer, though he could not help seeing the hang-dog visage of the old man. "Good morning to you," he said, coming nearer. "Have you seen anything o' one of my sheep anywhere about these parts?"

"No," growled Judas. "I've got enough to do to look after my own things, wi'out seeing other folk's shipp."

By this time they had come up very near to where the old man was standing. He was extracting the turnips from the pump's mouth, accompanying almost every word he uttered with a savage dash of one of the pieces to the ground. "Is that ice?" said Armstrong.

"No," muttered Judas; "it's some brutes as cum here last night and"—

"*What* is it you call 'em?" said the farmer, stooping to pick one up, as if dubious of Judas's meaning; "they don't look like anything alive!"

"Oh, them's turnips ; I dono' mean them ; I mean a lot o' thieves as cum here and woke me and my dame up last night, enough to give us were deaths o' cold : a bitter night like this too. I'll pay 'em out though, I will ; I expect it's some on 'em yonder i'th' village. I shall find it out yet, if it's longer fust. If it hadno' a snowed a'most all night I could a traced 'em reight to their own homes, I could. They trampled about my door, I can tell yo' ; just cum, Mister Armstrong, and look for yourself : they had sum'at to do, yo'll see. I should like to gie a good hidin' to every one i'th' place there, and then I should be sure to hev' th' reight un : they're all about alike except your son : he's about the only quiet un i'th' place."

Sure enough there lay the scattered fragments of the mounds Abel and Bill had piled up with so much enthusiasm a few hours earlier. They were now divided into little ignominious heaps as Judas had shovelled them, only that the angles were smoothed and curved by fresh fallen snow. But the sort of condolence Judas got from Mr. Armstrong was far from mitigating his miseries. "Listen to me, Judas," said the farmer in a stern voice, disregarding the old man's complaints ; "I wish particularly to warn you that there is a great deal of inconvenience attending the life of a thief. And you'll find, after all, that honesty is the best policy. Now, in future, if you want to buy anything in my way, I shall not refuse to sell to you ; and if you were starving I dono' say that I should say no to *giving* you a trifle. But we are going to have new

patent padlocks put on all the barn doors ; so if you know of anybody who thinks of stealing anything, you may just tell 'em they'll find it troublesome : and besides that, Derby jail is very cold just now, and not the pleasantest lodging at the best of times. With that piece of friendly advice, I wish you good morning."

Old Judas was woefully crestfallen. His mean form shrank visibly under the farmer's castigation, while he muttered some inarticulate threats between his teeth as he turned to go into his barn. It was plain that he saw what the whole trick meant, that he had been discovered, or at least strongly suspected, and would be closely watched and prevented from marauding in future. From that time he was shrewd enough never to try it again.

The news of this exploit was whispered as a secret to one after another until the report was so weighty that it began to leak, and in a very short time it oozed out into a common subject of lively gossip, greatly to the increase of Abel's popularity, already very high. Judas and his wife were commonly looked upon with a suspicious eye by all parties ; the well-to-do, because they had something to lose and feared losing some of it ; and the honest poor, because they disdained to be classed in the same category with the old couple, whom they looked upon as a disgrace to the neighbourhood. Thus the whole of the parish was ready to rejoice at Abel's sortie, as being likely to prove effectual in preventing the delinquents from future peccancy.





## CHAPTER V.

### RUSTIC GALLANTRY.

Kind Nature's charities his steps attend:  
In every babbling brook he finds a friend.

WORDSWORTH.

THE end of the vacation drawing to a close, Abel reluctantly left his village pastimes and once more returned to school; where, notwithstanding that he found many companions and plenty of boisterous mirth, the time lagged wearily. He was not ambitious to climb the ladder of learning, and no spirit of emulation endowed him with wings to raise him above himself. He had never been happy away from a home always congenial to his taste and disposition; and now towards the end of the "half," he sought and found means to convey a letter to Grayworth—though such a thing was not yet dreamed of as Rowland Hill sending letters by George Stevenson's locomotive anywhere in the United Kingdom for a penny each. Abel intimated to his parents that he considered he had got enough of school lore for all the purposes of a farmer: that his father was a farmer, his grandfather was a farmer, that he himself liked everything about a

farm, and always reckoned farming to be the most delightful business in the world; that he-therefore wished to be a farmer, and as it went against the grain to make a great sponge of himself, he was averse to draining his substance from his parents and idling his time away any longer, but would prefer to leave school at Christmas and go home and begin to do something for himself.

Seeing there was no help for it, his father and mother gave him up as a scholar, but gladly welcomed him as a son when he bade farewell to Blayton and returned at Christmas to settle down finally at Grayworth.

Once established on the farm with a feeling of responsibility upon him, it was soon seen, from the various remarks he made to his father about the necessity of improvement in different matters, that Abel had a quick eye for business: it was ceded on all sides that his disposition pointed that way; that he was steady in his habits and character, never failing in application to his duties, though he never left off rambling. In all his available spare time he was off with his stick in his hand, now drawing down boughs of trees or hedges, then examining mole-hills, now hunting for birds'-nests, levering up some root or other, climbing a tree, peering into the river to explore its mysteries of fish, frogs, or plants; in short, he courted and walked with Nature, and like a true and constant lover, he loved her in all her moods. Loving alike the storm-rent clouds

and the clear blue summer sky, he strolled and revelled to his heart's delight in the hottest summer sunshine, and gloried in the fiercest thunderstorm. By the hedge rows and flowery banks he never wanted occupation : not a local flower grew but its name he knew : the sunrise was his peculiar delight : he roamed through the fields with his feet bathed in dew to see the earth wake in the morning. Life in Abel was a potent spirit, impatient of the bonds of sleep ; these he cast off early every morning to sally forth unfettered in good time to greet the dawn of other life, the unfolding of the country as it comes up out of the darkness bathed and refreshed with dew, to see his beloved hills greeted and kissed by the warm sunlight : all the brightness of the scene reflected back itself upon his own heart, making his face radiant with pleasure-beams. He was a jovial companion withal, ever ready for any sport or pastime not degrading to his nature ; a stalwart and brave fellow indeed until he reached his twentieth year : then all suddenly his strength failed him ; he succumbed, almost without an effort to defend himself, to an attack from the ubiquitous little torturer with invisible wings.

The arrow that smote Abel pointed as the only hope of cure to the healing balsam ensconced somewhere about the pretty face of Christiana Bloomfield, a lively village lass, as unlike a gorgon as can well be imagined—yet her look struck Abel dumfounded : and that at the very time when he was most anxious to speak and make himself agreeable. Night and day he thought

and mused upon his state without abating his pangs. He hugged and pressed the little dart that rankled in his bleeding heart ; then, all his sense bewildered, he dabbled in the gentle stream, and passed his time as in a dream, till, deeper plunged, he floundered and grew dizzy. Insignificant now were the golden sunbeams of the western sky at evening compared with Chrissie's yellow hair. The pink of the rose on his garden wall was loveliest of all the colours to him till he saw the rich blush on her cheek. The white rose, he thought, reflected her brow, the blue sky beamed in her eyes, but the crimson carnation of her lips made him sigh whenever he saw them. To look upon her and not dare to speak of that which lay at his heart was tantalising. Why was he silent on the subject that engrossed his thoughts ? Was it because of a new-born feeling, which, like a new-born infant, was innocent and untaught in its language ? However this may have been, he was for a considerable time wading in most uncomfortable depths of uncertainty.

To all his mother's enquiries concerning his loss of spirits, Abel briefly replied by an uniform declaration to the effect that nothing was the matter. He would gladly have been left unnoticed, to flatter himself into the belief that he kept this little affair quietly hidden from every one. He knew that his mother's enquiries were made with the best of motives. Alas ! for Abel, she was not the only one who guessed his secret. It was fated that in addition to his inward trials he was to be teased and tormented

on all sides from without by his inquisitive neighbours. Several of the merry matrons of Grayworth knew his disease, never for a moment having mistaken the symptoms : they persevered with the sagacity common to their sex until they ascertained who was the individual cause of the change in him. One of these ladies seeing Abel one day in the presence of Christiana and her little brother and sister in the opposite meadow, observed that he did not pass the gate, as it had appeared he intended to do, but hesitated, then opened it and walked into the meadow, as if he had altered his mind : then when he approached Chrissie and the children he did not wish them a good morning with a pleasant word or two and pass on, as was his custom ; nor did he walk as one with a purpose : he had lost his old straightforward gait. He loitered about the little group and looked admiringly at Chrissie, then turned to the children with a sigh and said he wished he were one of them.

"Indeed, I don't," said Chrissie, with her blue eyes full of laughter, and her heart as free as her countenance was open, "for if I had you as well as them to mind I don't know what I *should* do : I often find trouble enough to keep them all good, without being troubled with such a great boy as you."

Abel smiled and walked away reluctantly. "What a stupid booby I was," he soliloquised on gaining the air of freedom again : "I've lost the best chance I ever had ; it was thrown right in my face, and I hadn't the sense to make use of it."

Though the inquisitive Mrs. Turner had heard nothing, she had seen enough to convince her that her previous opinion was well founded; and from that time she mercilessly aimed at his devoted head those gentle shafts and squibs that women are expert in dealing. The news sped like wild-fire round the village. Plump Mrs. Bingham was the first to give him a broad hint upon the subject: "What a hurry you are in, Abel," she said, with an irrepressible twitch of her risibles, as he passed her door one morning shortly afterwards. "Won't you come in and look at my periwinkles? They are such a lovely light blue! They say you've taken to that colour amazingly. Now," she added, coaxingly, "do just take one for your button-hole; it would remind you of somebody's eyes, you know." It was only the day after that Mrs. Thompson, who had been but a year married, was watering her flowers as Abel passed. She told him, with a sly look, that he would be quite welcome to a piece of her broom-flower, to help to sustain his spirits till he could get a sight of some curls the same colour. And as Christiana was in the habit of walking out with her mother's baby in her arms, Joseph Lander's buxom wife caricatured her in the capacity of *nurse* for Abel's entertainment. Seeing from her bay window that he was approaching, she took, on the spur of the moment, a white tablecloth, and rolled it up and tied a white petticoat round it, then placed herself at the window with this improvised baby in her arms, ready to watch for Abel's friendly nod. As he passed she laughed

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and dandled her huge doll up and down in vigorous nursing style, greatly to the chagrin of poor Abel, who would have been furious had it been Joseph himself who had practised such a joke. As it was, he contented himself by letting some of his loose steam escape in unworthy invectives against the sprightly but inoffensive wife. "I wonder," he muttered to himself, "if she thinks Chrissie Bloomfield could ever look as clumsy as *she* does—a great over-grown she-elephant. She's not good enough to be mentioned in the same day as Chrissie. Joe Lander has some taste, he has; he deserves a good thrashing for want of better judgment, and I should like to give it to him."

Poor Abel was beset on every side; everybody was rallying him. What should he do? He went home, and threw himself desperately into a chair in his own room to make inquiries of himself; but he was not much clearer about the matter when he rose again. He jumped up at the end of half-an-hour, took up his hat sharply, and rushed out of the house, with a vow that he would go straight away to Christiana and tell her of his devotion. But the bare thought of a refusal from her brought a burning sensation to his cheek. "No," he said, and he retraced his steps, "I made such a fool of myself the last time I saw her, I'll wait at *least* till I have enough command over my feelings to behave sensibly." He would go to Chrissie's mother, he thought—*she* knew that he was not always so awkward; he would go and speak to her privately; he knew she would say a good word for him. But, then,

if she were in favour of some one else, as was very likely, to be the case! Christiana was so pretty, somebody was sure to fall in love with her; no man could help it who had once seen her; besides, her mother might laugh at him, think that it was all nonsense, or say that he was too young, or something of the sort; so he turned moodily into the farm-yard again, resolved to wait for what chance might turn up for him. He acknowledged to himself now that he was miserable; he harassed himself continually with the query as to how he should get back his gay and jaunty spirits again. By never more thinking of Christiana? Impossible! That could never be! The very thought of her name brought up before him a picture of her face and form that set his heart palpitating with a warm restless joy that he nursed and found comfort in. No! he could never think of giving her up: there was yet hope remained to him; he would bear his miseries for the present. The opportunity would surely come for him to see her alone some day; till then he would submit to fate. He cared not how much he had to suffer for her sake. He loved to think about her; he *would* think about her, cost what it might. He was ready to endure anything rather than she should see him at so great a disadvantage as his present feelings and appearance would involve. If he could hope that he should ever be agreeable to her he should be happy; but on this point he had grave doubts, for he had seen her speaking, "with such a winning face," to Harry Smith; and while he himself



was wasting time he might be losing her for ever. If she would but favour him with one such look, he thought, he could never be unhappy again. He resolved at all events to be patient till the first opportunity offered itself, and then, without delay, to seize it and plead his suit.

With something of the spirit of a martyr, Abel assumed rather a lofty air in his endurance. Regarding his self-imposed silence with some degree of satisfaction, he carried himself for a time a little more like Abel Armstrong before he lost his heart.

Matters were in this state when one fine morning he strolled out, with a slower step than usual, to see how a certain field of corn was progressing, thinking, as usual, about her whom nothing could erase from his mind. He looked round, scarcely hoping for a sight so dazzling, when he beheld her at the far end of the opposite meadow. She had with her a basket of apples, which she had just lifted over the stile, and was her self in the act of getting over, at the same time looking cautiously round the field, evidently to make sure that Baalam Bentricks's bull was not there.

Many of the neighbours had petitioned Baalam to keep this ferocious animal in close quarters; but he had invariably answered with the same uncourteous reply, advising them, in his own style, to occupy their heads with their own affairs; though that this of which they complained was strictly their own business he was well aware. Once, upon being very much pressed about the matter, he added that the meadow was his

own, and he was not going to keep the beast stived up to make it bad and lose by it to please anybody.

Though this was some part of the truth, it was not the "whole truth and nothing but the truth." Baalam had tried four years previously to stop the path; but the people being tenacious of their rights, all resisted the innovation. As the path through that field saved the pedestrians from taking a tiresome circuitous way by the high road, it was a consideration in point of time to such of the men who went that way to work, to those who went on errands, and to the women who went to market every week with their trifles of garden stuff or butter, eggs, or chickens; as well as to the poor labourers' wives, who went to the town with a view to economy for their little marketings. Time was of great importance to a hard-pressed peasant woman, who had probably a sick child or hungry boys at home, or, as was sometimes the case, a helpless aged mother or father, who could have none of their wants attended to until she had finished her marketings and got back home to her ordinary duties again.

As the stoppage of this path would have detracted more or less from the comfort and convenience of every one in the village, the whole neighbourhood set its face against being deprived of a privilege it had enjoyed from time immemorial. It was the spirit of tenacity to this old right that Baalam determined to revenge; added to which he had a natural aversion to women and children, through having been, as the village folks had it, crossed in love by the infidelity of a saucy black-

eyed damsel in his earlier acquaintance with the world.

Whether this were so or not, Baalam was, from some peculiarity, morose and disagreeable. His greatest pleasure seemed to be in buttercup time to punish and frighten the little children whose tiny feet were tempted to stray from the path of duty, attracted by the bright flowers, till they could fill their chubby hands with the golden-cups and daisies that grew among his grass. As if to make things worse, Baalam's dislike to the children seemed to give them an extra relish for the flowers that grew in his particular field; so all his watching only resulted in making himself more irritable; he was continually kicking against the thorns—all children being, according to common consent, either thorns or flowers; and Baalam, being one of the miserable minority who knew not the secret of extracting or enjoying their sweetness, neither saw nor felt that children were aught but a pest to the rest of the inhabitants of the world, or at best, in his most tractable moments, an evil necessary for the continuation of it.

When the grass had been mowed, and Baalam did not want the meadow for the turning in of harmless cattle, he usually had the gratification of making a summary dispersal of all the people from the field by investing it with his formidable and ungallant aid-de-camp, the bull.

Little did Abel think that such an antagonist was near while his own heart was fluttering in ecstasies at the sight of Christiana. She was rather dubious about

the matter before she got over the stile, having for some moments felt a little uncertain as to her safety : seeing nothing of the animal, however, she proceeded quietly on her way. But there he was ! lurking behind the hay-rick in the far corner of the field. She cast a suspicious glance over her shoulder towards that hidden corner from time to time as she walked along till she had got midway between the two stiles ; then, feeling reassured, she put on a free and easy sort of air, forgetting, with the vivacity of a child, the fear that had so lately assailed her, when Taurus, either by chance or design, thrust his head forth from behind the hay-rick. He gazed at his victim for a moment, then, as if in league with some fury below, he saluted the ground, pawing it wildly with his hoof, and in another instant the fearful and rapid repetitions of sounds as if escaping from some cavern beneath, reached Chrissie's ears, and struck her with affrighted dismay. A moment's glance made her aware of her peril. She threw down her basket, and with one wild shriek rushed on in an effort of despair to gain the stile.

Abel, almost frantic to desperation, witnessed the whole. The moment he saw the bull he bounded over the stile at a single leap and rushed madly towards Christiana. But he was too late ! The instant before he reached the spot he had the horror of seeing the savage beast arrest her as she was making a rush towards him with a helpless, affrighted look, her hands clasped high above her head in an agonizing

gesture of despair, but uttering no sound. Fortunately, the most pernicious stroke of the brute was obviated by his own fury. In his glaring rage he tossed her high up into the air, but blindly rushed too far for his worst intention of catching her on his deadly horns. She fell, though helpless and bleeding, alive and sensible over his clumsy neck.

Reckless of his own fate, Abel bounded on and seized one of the horns of the bull with herculean grip, knuckled his fist to a tremendous tension, and gave him a terrific blow on the eye, which served to stun him for a few seconds. It was scarcely a minute. The fury of the beast redoubled as he rose almost before the time Abel had taken to clear the stile with his precious burden, barely escaping as he did so with a bruise on his back from one of the horns, which in the fierce pursuit grazed him in catching the back of his coat, which it split up to the neck.

Abel's strength and presence of mind had rescued Christiana from the gravest consequences of the assault. He now found himself suddenly in a most unexpected situation: Christiana almost insensible, blood trickling from her mouth, was in his arms.

Now that he saw her under his own special care, he realised the truth of Addison's saying: "If Pain comes into a heart he is quickly followed by Pleasure; and if Pleasure enters you may be sure that Pain is not far off." Abel's sensations of pleasure and pain were so intimately blended that in the first few moments of his confusion he could not distinguish which of the two feel-

ings were in the ascendant. How bitterly he regretted he was not in the field earlier, that he might have saved poor Chrissie from all this. How deeply he grieved that she above all others should be the sufferer ; and how earnestly he hoped the injury might turn out after all to be but trifling, that this might prove only a fortuitous concurrence in his favour ; and how, after all, he rejoiced that he should have been so near the spot to prevent the worst consequences that might have happened. When he realised his position, and saw her child-like blue eyes looking gratefully up into his face, then Pleasure was uppermost. This was the most blissful moment he had ever experienced. So far from being borne down by his load, his step was much easier than it had been of late. Hope lent wings to his feet. He believed with all the ardour of youth that he should soon see Christiana restored to a perfect state of health ; and before he had arrived at her home he had begun to regard the accident which had provided him so much felicity as the most auspicious event that could have happened.

Several of the good neighbours who saw him carrying her with her pallid face resting involuntarily upon his shoulder were smitten with genuine sympathy ; but Abel could only gratify their apprehensions and curiosity as to the cause of the accident by a passing look of intelligence, leaving them startled and surprised at the spectacle. The difference between him and his burden was not greater than is often seen between a little nurse and a big baby : helpless as she was, Abel carried her

gently with her head cradled easily in the curve he had formed of his lifted shoulder and his well-grown arm.

Chrissie's injuries proved at length somewhat more serious than was at first apprehended by her friends. Her recovery was only partial ; she was never perfectly well afterwards, her constitution being so affected as eventually to shorten the term of her life. But Abel, while carrying her home, was in happy ignorance of all this, sensible only of the intense satisfaction of having been able, alone and unaided, to serve her effectually in her time of need.

Though much weakened from the fright and loss of blood, Christiana was quite conscious of her state and situation while Abel was carrying her towards home. Deeply sensible of the debt she owed him, she expressed her obligations in a few simple words of earnest gratitude : repeating her thanks several times in a low voice, that would have been inaudible to any one else, but was sweetly clear to him : " Thank you, Abel ; I thank you very much indeed."

As soon as Abel reached the house, Christiana's mother, in the deepest distress, sent for Doctor Perry ; who, however, was from home. He was away at Derby, to be present at an important dinner of the Brethren of Freemasons, at the Freemasons' Inn. It was a singular coincidence that whenever the doctor went to penetrate into the mysteries of masonry, instruments, implements, deaths-head and cross-bones, he was himself invariably, though perhaps unconsciously, in the service of the latter grim emblems by

absenting himself from some one or other of his unlucky patients at home.

There being no other doctor in the place, Abel hastened off and made his man Jonas help him saddle the mare as quickly as possible. Begging his active mother to go to Mrs. Bloomfield's and see what could be done for Chrissie in the meanwhile, he set off at once for the Freemasons' Inn, Derby. The ground flew from before him. In a few minutes he had cleared the distance, and was at the door of the inn.

Was Doctor Perry there? They would enquire. Would he alight? He did alight: but not to linger. "Oh! Doctor," he said, meeting Dr. Perry at the foot of the large staircase, "it's very fortunate I have found you! You must come directly! Don't wait for your own horse! take my mare, and I'll walk. Go directly, please, to Mrs. Bloomfield's. A very serious accident! The oldest daughter,—you know her, the one with bright yellow hair,—she has been shamefully tossed by that cursed bull of old Baalam's: the poor girl has vomited blood, and she is in a very bad state."

"Indeed!" said the doctor, looking very grave; not about the accident however, but at the thought of losing his dinner: he was remarkably fond of turtle soup.

"I say, Perry! what's that confab about there? We are not going to let you run away."

This appeal settled the doctor's wavering inclination. The voice issued from one of the adjoining rooms. Its owner was a gay-looking gentleman in very tight



white trousers, fine brown cloth coat, and azure waist-coat, the rolled down collar of which swelled over a snowy shirt-front ornamented with a large transparent cambric frill, and closed in at the short waist by only four or five inches of buttoning.

"Aye, aye; all right, Grimshaw," returned the doctor; "I'll be with you presently."

Then turning to Abel and feeling for a piece of paper and pencil, he said: "I'll tell you what, Armstrong; you go into Sangly Street; about half-way down you'll see a house by itself, with a dark green door and brass knocker: there you'll find my friend, Mr. Ostium—here is his address. Present my compliments, and tell him that I am engaged and shall be obliged if he will officiate for me. He will go with pleasure."

Abel was astonished and disgusted that the doctor did not seize his hat and rush into the saddle the moment he was apprised of the accident. But seeing him take the matter so coolly, he had no redress and no alternative: so he leaped into the saddle himself, and went to find Mr. Ostium: who, as the innocent-looking old housekeeper informed him, was 'not within,' and in answer to Abel's eager and pressing interrogations, shook her head disconsolately and said she doubted whether he *would* be at home at present, that she feared it might be hours first: she gave him at the same time, regardless of his youthful appearance, an account of the case as she had received it from the husband of the poor woman whom Mr. Ostium was gone to deliver from her tribulations.

Abel moodily turned the mare's head about and retraced his steps for Doctor Perry again.

Pleasure, according to our different conceptions of it, is what everyone is more or less fond of. No one would choose to be interrupted in the enjoyment of it. But an interruption like this to a man of Doctor Perry's temperament was too much just as he was about to enjoy, besides 'the feast of reason and the flow of soul,' a solid feast of delicacies equally congenial to his taste, with the addition of a steaming bowl of punch and a copious flow of sparkling wine, fragrant weeds and choicest fruits, all spiced with such lively intercourse of wit and conversation as seldom fails to be welcome to every one, as a respite to the overworked brain, a congenial species of entertainment to the mediocre, and to the idle and weak-minded a happy resource for killing time.

To be interrupted in such a course of pleasure was beyond the bounds of Doctor Perry's ideas of self-denial. He could not brook it with any approach to equanimity of temper. It was as much as he could bear quietly to be summoned from the company *once*. He no sooner saw Abel's face again, and learned the cause of his return, than, feeling desperately annoyed at being almost compelled to leave the present company and go to Grayworth, he put himself into a towering passion, and in very strong phraseology declared it to be his solemn belief that he should be hunted out of his *life* by women; that they were never satisfied if they thought that he or any other

man was having any peace. "Women," he said, "are the beginning, centre, and end of all the confounded mischief that ever was perpetrated on the face of the earth since the foundation of the world. I'll defy any man to steer clear of them. He is an arrant fool who tries at it. They are so wily that they'll find a man out in any hole or corner wherever he may hide himself in the fruitless endeavour to escape them. They are the devil's own. It always was so, and it always will be." He would venture to consign himself to most ungenial depth if a woman would not devise some means or other to torment a man's life out of him. He finished with an unqualified wish that the bull and his master were both together in the safe custody of the great unpopular of the horn and hoof fraternity.

Abel heard him out to the end, and feeling warm himself, told him, in no very polite terms, that he might rely upon it that the bull would most assuredly go either to the place he had just mentioned, or somewhere else very soon; as it was his fixed intention not to allow such a ferocious beast to remain much longer at Grayworth; that the affair should not end in talk, as he had made up his mind for action if the brute were not removed at once.

By the time Abel had finished this short statement, the doctor, whose temper was of equally short duration, was cooled down a little. He agreed to compromise the matter by writing a few simple directions, to be attended to by the women.

"There, Armstrong," he said, when he had written some hasty directions on his pocket-book as he stood, "take that, and tell the girl's mother to attend to it directly."

"But ——," Abel was beginning to remonstrate.

"Aye, aye," said the doctor, impatiently; "I'll ride over in the course of the evening, and see her myself without fail. She'll take no hurt, as far as I can judge—at any rate for the present. I don't suppose I could do anything more for her if I were there myself. You must see that that note is attended to as quickly as possible. I shall see her all in good time. Good day, good day."

Once invested with the healing message from this disciple of Esculapius, Abel, heedless of the punctured sides of his faithful mare, mercilessly spurred her on and rode like the wind till he reached the goal. His much-coveted prize was Christiana's welcome. He received it with more trepidation than he believed himself capable of, and with emotion as profound as that of a devoted general who kneels to receive the honours of his merit from the hands of his queen.





## CHAPTER VI.

### ABEL ENCOUNTERS HIS FOUR-FOOTED ENEMY.

Believe me, this is truth,  
Not the false glozings of a flattering tongue.  
Instruct me in what my power may serve thee,  
For never shalt thou say thou hast a friend  
More firm, more constant.

POTTER'S *ÆSCHYLUS*.

THE ancient method of placing the sick by the way-side, in order to obtain the benefit of experimental advice, need not have been resorted to here, even had there been no other system of cure. No sooner had Abel started in search of the doctor, than Christiana's mother was surrounded with a superabundance of advisers; amongst whom it was not easy just then to distinguish the genuine sympathiser from the curiosity-seeker. This numerous attendance of village women pressed eagerly about with multifarious offerings of prescriptions which, had they been all carried out, Christiana herself must have been carried out shortly after their infliction, which would have starved, or gorged, or fevered, or shivered her to death. Old Prudence Underwood cautioned Mrs. Bloomfield against giving the patient anything whatever to eat; declaring

that if she were to take anything at present, 'information' would be sure to set in ; an opinion which Dorothy Gardener contemptuously ignored, saying she knew that plenty of beef, nearly raw, should be given to the patient incessantly, for the purpose of making more new blood. Charity Smith insisted that copious draughts of cold water should be given to the sufferer to prevent fever. Good Mrs. Brown, from Mapleberry Farm, said that the poor creature must have plenty of nourishment, and take as much red wine as she could drink ; while Hannah Meadowcalf stoutly maintained that brandy was the panacea for all ills. One good old soul, the grocer's wife, urged that very hot fomentations should be applied immediately. But Betsy Barnes would hear of nothing but cold water for both 'inside and out,' because the doctor had used and recommended it in a case of hæmorrhage that had come under her own notice.

Fortunately, it was impossible even to attempt the adoption of all these and fifty other propositions as remedies suggested by her officious but well-meaning neighbours ; so poor Mrs. Bloomfield, almost bewildered by this overpowering generosity, thanked her neighbours for their kindly intentions: hinting to them the necessity of quietness for the present, she told them she should be pleased to see them at another time, and, with the sole aid of good Mrs. Armstrong, put the sufferer to bed, relieving her thirst in the simplest manner with only a little toast-water, until Abel should return with the official directions from the doctor—who, for some

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reason, omitted to come to see her according to promise on that day. The 'women' attended, however, strictly to his orders, boiling such 'simples' as he directed, administering the decoction, and keeping the patient quiet, and sufficiently warm without making her uncomfortably so, that she took, as he said to Abel, no further hurt.

When on the next morning he came at about eleven o'clock to redeem his promise, it was observed that he had lost none of his colour, though it had shifted from his cheeks to his nose; where it did not add either to the healthiness or the elegance of his appearance, especially as a few additional bright spots were left tenaciously adhering to his face and forehead. His apology was, either for his appearance or non-appearance, whichever he intended it for, that he was *down right knocked up*.

Thanks to youth and a good constitution, Christiana soon showed symptoms of revival, as would have been impossible with many. With little of the doctor's skill she gradually recovered to the enjoyment of some years of life, although her health was never quite robust after the accident.

When Abel hastened into the house with the directions from the doctor, his mother noticed the blank expression upon his face as he looked at the empty couch upon which Christiana had been placed when he carried her in. Seeing his disappointment, she invited him to come and deliver his message up stairs, as then he could see Chrissie, about whom his mother reckoned

it but natural that he should feel anxious. He quickly followed ; but when once in the august presence of the little personage, he lost his wonted presence of mind, and, to his great mortification, suddenly assumed a very awkward, not to say stupid, attitude. He delivered himself readily enough of the paper containing the written directions ; but on commencing to give the reason for his delay, he found himself frightened at the sound of his own voice. Then came in the course of his relation, his embarrassment at the impropriety he had been guilty of in mentioning the cause of Mr. Ostium's absence from home, which, in his confusion and natural artlessness, he had begun to recount, after the manner of the old housekeeper, before he had thought that it might not be suitable to a young girl's feelings of delicacy. Recollecting himself suddenly, he made a full stop just in the middle of a story which had the merit of being singular if not very interesting. This did not add to the grace of his débüt. His mother came to the rescue, and assisted him to stammer out what little else he had to say for himself, when Mrs. Bloomfield expressed a wish to know if he did not think Chrissie seemed much easier. He turned for the first time with a full look towards the bed, where the sufferer lay waiting to catch his eye. She stretched out her little arm to shake hands with him, saying with much feeling, as he approached and took her hand, " Oh ! Abel, I shall never be able to thank you enough for all your goodness to me ; but I never dare go across that dreadful meadow any more while I live."



Abel's resolution was fixed from that moment. He determined that instant in his own mind that for the future, either Baalam should keep the brute out of the way, or that he would devise some means himself to tame it or else kill it outright with his own hand.

If Abel could not *speak* with his usual freedom, he could at least feel honest and manly : and the strength of these feelings in his heart radiated his countenance with a charm that was irresistible to those who had the care to observe it. Christiana's eyes lingered upon him with a decidedly appreciative regard while he was taking his leave, assuring her that there would be no bull to be feared by the time she was well enough to walk out in the fields again.

Abel seldom blustered stormily, even upon the greatest provocation, though by the whole force of his nature he made himself felt wherever he happened to be. When anything in particular was to be done, he had the rare ability to wait patiently or act promptly, according as prudence seemed to demand. Curbed by conscience, his power, such as it was, was coupled with a genuine frankness that carried conviction with it. It was a remarkable characteristic of his, even in his youth, to consider well the consequences before making a promise : once having made one, he regarded it as a fiat that must be accomplished.

"Oh, dear ! Oh, dear !" said Mrs. Armstrong, as she entered the bedroom again after showing her son down stairs, "I wonder whatever that boy has got in

his head now? I hope to goodness he wont go and run himself into any danger."

"No fear o' that," said Mrs. Bloomfield; "he's too clever a lad to do any thing foolish, I'll warrant."

"Aye," said the mother, "but he's very self-willed when he makes up his mind to anything: I believe the Pope o' Rome couldn't turn him; I can see he's got *something* in his head; and I know he'll have his own way."

Mrs. Bloomfield hoped it was all for the best whatever it might be, and felt assured that Abel could be trusted in anything. She expressed, with the most sincere eulogies of his character, her own appreciation of his bravery in defending and protecting her daughter, and attributed the slight pallor on his face to exhaustion caused by the fierce excitement he had sustained in extricating Christiana from her formidable antagonist. His mother was rather inclined to think his paleness was the consequence of inanition, feeling convinced that he must be sorely in need of refreshment, he having taken nothing for eight or nine hours. Declining Mrs. Bloomfield's offer to have something prepared for him, Mrs. Armstrong excused herself for a short time and went home, where she could have the satisfaction of seeing that her son was well provided for by her own hands.

Notwithstanding his prodigious appetite, Abel utilised the short time it took to prepare the repast, in drawing up a formal petition, to be signed by the most respectable portion of the neighbouring

inhabitants, to the effect that Master Baalam Bentrick, of Bigloft Farm, should from this time henceforth and for ever refrain from allowing freedom to the bull then in his possession, or to any other animal likely to be inimical to the safety and peace of the neighbourhood. The petition further showed, in plain terms, that if Baalam did not choose to keep the animal out of the way as a favour, it would in all probability be wrested from him or destroyed by force.

Having done ample justice to the ham and eggs, Abel took the paper first to Squire Godfrey, at the Hall, to whom he stated the particulars of several other cases besides that of Christiana. He did not forget to add that, from the nature of Baalam's temper, they were likely to have some opposition to contend with. He endeavoured to prevail upon the Squire, who was a magistrate, to acquiesce in his design to rid the place of the vicious brute by force or violence in case of Baalam's refusal to comply with the conditions of the petition. Abel was rather taken aback, however, when the Squire explained to him that the *law* must not be broken; that if he or any other person whomsoever should commit any act in violation of it, he himself, for one, must do his duty in case of Bentrick's appeal for justice: he therefore advised, if Abel was meditating anything rash, that he should hesitate before committing himself, as he would certainly have to bear the consequences of any kind of disregard to the law that he might be guilty of. But from his courteous affability, his kind inquiries

about the patient, his considerate manner altogether, his smile at the mention of Baalam's temper, his familiar kindness in rectifying two or three clauses of the petition with his own hand, and his consent, after the rectification, to sign his own name first in the list of the petitioners,—from all this, Abel went away fully assured that at all events he had the Squire's interest and good will on his side.

From thence Abel started to find Amos Hobbs, at the Horsepool Farm; where, willing or not, he must stop and taste the home-brewed beer, tell them all the news, have a little chat about markets, crops, and cattle: these, and the butter, cheese, poultry, and a few other things of common interest, unavoidably took up time. Abel found that even with the greatest assiduity he should be overtaken by the night before he could half accomplish what he had intended to do. There was no help for it. He must 'rest on his oars.' It seemed a long time since he had risen in the morning. The day had been very eventful to him. He gave up the waiting upon the rest of the petitioners till the following morning, when he persevered till he had obtained signatures of the rector, the curate, the doctor, Joeson the inn-keeper, and three farmers. In addition to these names, he obtained those of the wheelwright, the grocer, the butcher, the blacksmith, the shoemaker, and a few others, persons of humble position, who wrote but indifferently, or signed to their names with a cross, as the case might be; all of whom, however, could easily discern their liability to be

inconvenienced by contact with the four-footed enemy.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening of the following day when Abel had completed his task. Being unable to infuse his impatient haste into the quiet spirit of the village, he regarded its tranquillity on that day as he regarded his heavy boots, as an unavoidable clog upon him. He would have preferred going from place to place without loitering. But loitering was an institution at Grayworth ; which was, in point of briskness as well as time, much more remote from London then than now. People only did business at Grayworth that they might live.

No sooner had Abel got his petition duly signed, than he repaired, with his old friend Bill Brown, to Baalam Bentricks's house, with the purpose of presenting it. He told Bentricks that he did not doubt of his readiness to grant it, as he took him for a gentleman ! This was a refined deviation from the strict line of integrity, which custom and society recognised in those days.

But Baalam, with more candour than politeness, assevered that he would not ' stir a peg,' that it was more than they dare do to interfere with any part of his property, and urged them to " be off " out of his house before he should be tempted to help them off. He trembled with rage as he opened his door and went to lock his gate after them, saying, with mean vindictiveness, that there was no telling what people would not do now-a-days if he did not take care to lock up securely and keep thieves out.

Abel, perversive to insult as he was, dashed off his coat at this, thrust up his shirt sleeves, and would have betrayed himself into violence but for a rebuke from his friend in a severe under-tone. "Now, Abel," said his companion, "don't go and make a blackguard of yourself. Chrissie wouldn't thank you for *that*, I can tell you."

Abel caught the words 'blackguard' and 'Chrissie,' and was struck somehow with the feeling that such a conjunction did not accord in sound with the fitness of things. He contented himself with showing Baalam the tremendous muscle of his arm, as strong as a thousand of the toughest flax-fibres twisted and knit together, admonishing him that either he or his favourite four-footed friend should feel the weight of it if the beast were ever again seen in the open field, or in any other place where it could endanger any living and defenceless creature.

Baalam laughed a triumphant sneer, declined the honour for the championship himself, and referred Abel to the bull as an adversary worthy of his prowess. Telling him he was quite welcome to try the game with *him*, they parted.

Early next morning Abel was at the meadow, and sure enough there was the enemy, leering as craftily as usual.

Abel returned home, procured a ladder and a saw, and went direct to the lower end of the orchard, where stood a fine old ash-tree, which he immediately climbed for the purpose of possessing himself of one of its

straightest branches. Having found one to his mind, he sawed it off, and threw it, with the saw, on to the ground, and rapidly descended the tree till he grasped the lowest support with his sinewy hand ; disdaining to use the ladder, he swung for a moment in the air, then gained the ground with a leap, and began directly to work the stout branch he had chosen into a weapon. Stripping it of its lesser branches and foliage, he whistled in a low contemplative fashion as he slowly walked towards the house again. He sought for the hatchet that lay in the wood yard, and began hacking at the stout bark and to shape and level his weapon according to his notion of the size and form it should assume, when his mother called out in surprise, "What ar't' chopping wood for, Abe? Old Jonas can chop all t' wood we want, lad."

"Aye ; but he can't chop what I want," said Abel, doggedly, as he worked on at his weapon without raising his eyes.

"Why, my lad," returned his mother, stepping out at the back door, and observing that he was shaping a stake, "whatever is that for?"

"Why, mother," he said firmly, as he looked full into her face for a sign of her approbation, "I'm going to give yon bull a sound thrashing."

However much Mrs. Armstrong prided herself in the ability of her boy, she could not but think he was going beyond the limits of discretion in such a venture. She almost cried out in alarm at the bare thought of a contest with such fearful odds against him.

"Nay, my lad ! thee wouldno' go and throw away thy life i' that way. Do thee be ruled by me, and lay that ugly thing down, or I shall have thee brought home broken-limbed or mangled to death."

"Leave that to me, mother. I'm not such a fool as to go and put my life in the power of any beast ; but there's been too much harm done by that brute. It's high time somebody taught him that people were not made for his amusement. He's had his way long enough ; it's *my* turn now. I mean to thrash him. If I can't manage it one way, I will another. There's no such thing as fair play with a beast like that. There's nothing to fear, mother," he added, with an assuring look at her quiet, supplicating face. "You may depend upon it I wouldn't risk good blood on *him*."

Abel imbibed his determinate spirit from his mother ; and she, better than anyone else, knew how useless it was, and had been ever since he had arrived at an age when he could form his own judgment, to argue any point with him upon which he had thoroughly made up his mind. Understanding now that he saw his way clear before him, she felt convinced that persuasion from her would be in vain, and only uttered, as she turned into the house, the ejaculatory but fervent prayer, "The Lord help my brave lad, and keep him from danger!"

Abel took off his coat, removed the braces from his shoulders, and buckled round his waist a temporary belt that he had improvised from one of the traces of



some horse-gear at hand ; then attaching a tough leathern thong to the stake, which he had scooped out towards the handle for that purpose, he slipped his right hand through the loop of leather, and tried a stroke of the shaft on a sack of shavings lying near; doing the same with his left hand. Having adjusted matters exactly to his mind, he set out thus equipped to tame the bull.

It was a rustic mode of arming himself: but, storing the kindly-given advice of Squire Godfrey in his mind, he suffered his vengeance to cool down from his first intention of shooting or slaying the creature. *There* he drew the line, however: considering that it would be legal to do anything short of killing, he came to the conclusion that having to avenge his own sister's wounds, and those of his more than friend, Chrissie, he should be doing at the same time a little acceptable business for two or three old women and a couple of little children, all of whom had been injured by the same creature—besides partially fulfilling a compact he had made with himself, if he could belabour the animal so soundly as to frighten it from the presence of humanity, or at least tame it so far that there might be no further danger in crossing the field of which at present the bull was constituted the sole occupant by *brute force*.

To accomplish his will, Abel designed to make use of the 'five-stem tree' for his protection, if only he could reach that spot in safety. He knew the animal would directly approach and make an attack upon

him ; he knew also that the trees would furnish a safe retreat for him in his uttermost extremity.

While he got over the stile and walked about one-third the length of the field, his old antagonist stood grazing as quiet as a milking-cow, looking up from time to time with a serene expression, that would have given one unacquainted with his antecedents to believe that he was the quintessence of all the innocence in the bovine world.

When Abel was half-way between the two stiles was the moment for Taurus to flaunt his true colours. He bellowed for an instant, then started off, dipping his horns to the ground at every step as though he would raise some power to assist him.

But Abel was wide awake. He rushed back for the clump of trees. It took but a moment for him to get there and slip between them, with his stout staff upright in his hand. The next instant the bull rushed up with terrific force, glaring fiercely as he butted his horns against the massive trunks of the trees. He bellowed and roared between each opening in succession, till, with running round and round in savage pursuit of a victim that balked him on every side, he frothed and foamed with rage before Abel could grasp to a dead certainty the lashing tail of the beast, which he tried over and over again to secure. He succeeded at length ; then leaving his place of refuge instantly, he dexterously twisted the animal's tail round his left hand and kept himself in the rear at a safe distance from the horns, the bull dragging him round and round, now trying to

escape him, now to double upon him. Now Abel let him feel the weight of the weapon he wielded with his strong right arm. He swung it high and brought it down heavily again and again upon the sides and back of the enraged brute rushing round and round, bellowing all the while till the whole neighbourhood was raised.

In about three minutes Abel was surrounded by a larger gathering of people than ever good John Beel, the Methodist preacher, had succeeded in getting together during three years. The place was in a tumult: men, women, and children hooted, hallooed, and clapped their hands at the sight. "That's right, Abel! Go it, Abel! Hurrah for Armstrong!" went up again and again from some scores of stentorian lungs, with an enthusiasm scarcely to be exceeded by the vivas for the successful matadore in all the glitter of the Plaza de Toros. The wildest yells of execration were poured forth against the bull and then against old Baalam; who, like the rest of the people, had been attracted by the noise: he stood now at the lower end of the field, almost petrified with rage at seeing Abel's advantage over the deputy he had on the previous evening unwittingly assigned to him for combat. Abel jerked back his head desperately to dash off the perspiration, now falling so fast as to impede his sight. By this time, however, the beast, finding that the trees did not answer his purpose, altered his tactics and struck off at a tangent for the open field. Abel instantly loosed his hold of the tail, and was about to retire to his place of refuge, unwilling to venture in an open

arena with nothing but a staff in his hand to contend alone with such an adversary. He had the satisfaction of seeing the animal stop short after a few paces, then walk rather slowly, gradually slackening its speed, to the lower part of the meadow and deliberately lie down.

Abel was well pleased with his morning's work. Not so old Baalam ; who had been grinding his teeth with spite as he witnessed the fray, and saw that it cost Abel nothing but the sweat of his brow ; while the beast, upon whom he counted so much, was so entirely subdued that it did not recover its appetite all day ; nor indeed on the following morning—when Baalam, seeing that the animal looked no brisker, went and brought one Patrick O'Murphy, an old man respected in the neighbourhood for his honest and gratuitous opinions on such matters, founded as they were upon much observation. Baalam found that the decision of this venerable veterinary was not consoling. He pronounced the beast to be in a very bad way, saying that the back would mortify ; that if he wished to save the life of it he must kill it on the spot—meaning that if Baalam did not choose to slaughter the beast without delay, he would neither make money nor meat of it.

Accordingly, Baalam delivered up the beast to the butcher. Himself he delivered forthwith into the hands of a lawyer ; who on being informed by the butcher as to the state of the carcase, declared it to be a *case*.

Everybody in the village was interested in the

agitation. Baalam, even in the sunniest moments of his prosperity, could have counted his friends upon his fingers' ends; but now that misfortune had fallen upon him there was scarcely a soul who volunteered to sit with him in its shadow. Being one of the few unfortunates who have neither light nor warmth within, Baalam was repulsively dreary in adversity.

The lawyer gave out that justice would demand from Abel or his father the full value of the beast, minus the carcass, in the current coin of the realm. Vox populi emphatically denounced the idea of such a concession, in terms so unmistakable as at length to lead lawyer Griffin to advise Bentricks for his own and the public weal to give up his claim. Laying the matter before his client in the light of self interest, this gentleman showed that in the event of Baalam obtaining the money, there were existing reasons for the apprehension of the loss of all the combustible property he possessed, even should he not, in addition to such loss, suffer bodily injury through design of wicked individuals, who themselves having no money to refund, were careless of consequences; that it would be as useless to appeal to such persons for compensation for loss or injury as to try to extract blood from a post, the law in such cases only protecting the injured ones from further outrage by the same offending parties; not binding itself to recognise the obligation on its own part of making good such property as might be destroyed—so that, though he commiserated Baalam for the loss he had sustained, he must conscientiously

advise that he should not proceed with the action, but content himself with the thought that in this case the first loss would probably be the least.

Doctor Perry, in a conversation with some of his friends on the subject, opined that lawyer Griffin's reason for the advice he gave was that he saw in the ruin which the people designed for Baalam in case of his gaining the verdict, the loss of his client's fees, Baalam being certainly in for *ruin* by the people's determination to resort to incendiarism should he gain a moment's victory by law. But the doctor was young at that time, and probably judged too hardly of the lawyer.

Be that as it might, Baalam took the advice, and swallowed his rage with the best grace he could muster. But it seemed sorely to disagree with him, for a long time after it he looked sour and much perturbed.





## CHAPTER VII.

### CHRISSIE'S CONVALESCENCE.

It was a fair and mild autumnal sky,  
And earth's ripe treasures met the admiring eye.

CRABBE.

**I**X weeks of warm weather hung somewhat heavily over Christiana. Notwithstanding the cheerfulness of her disposition, the first few days while her weakness obliged her to keep her bed were specially trying to her. Some relief came, however; some little mitigation came to her in making the trifling preparations for getting up, as by slow degrees her gradually-increasing strength admitted of the change. Then it became pleasant to her to sit by her little low window and see her neighbours pass to and fro, smiling their congratulations and nodding at her affectionately from time to time as she returned their gentle salutations with the pleasure she realised at the hope of recovery. These little diversions, together with the employment of her fingers and thoughts, kept her from growing absolutely weary with ennui during the time of a slow and irksome convalescence; a trying time to the best of tempers, when prudence and the doctor forbid

the exertion one longs for; when the appetite is capricious, and one's whole nature seems at variance with itself as one feels neither ill enough to force upon oneself that quietness we call resignation, nor well enough to carry oneself through without assistance; when the humiliating exposition of one's weakness irritates one's self-love in constantly opposing itself to one's independence. But Chrissie's natural amiability overcame many momentary vexations, so that upon the whole her troubles were, at the end of a month, as transient as April showers. The prospect from her window was lively enough now to chase away any little dulness that might creep into her bosom, had not the thought of Abel come to obliterate the scene immediately before her; to carry her wandering mind out beyond her present surroundings to his home, where her free fancy led her to see him teaching his birds to whistle certain notes; or to the orchard beyond his house, where she had often seen him pruning the trees and laughing about the extra fruit they would yield; or to the brook-side, where, in summer, she had often seen him toying with his dog. All these musings dazed and bewildered her and robbed her of her natural contentment. Her desire to see him was now urgent. She had so many amiable things to say to him in remembrance of his brave goodness to her; and she longed for the opportunity to speak to him and to hear him say something in return.

Without acknowledging any love in her heart, Christiana felt restless, unhappy, beguiled of some



treasure without knowing what it was she missed, possessed of some new blessing without being able to define it. She would not if she could have found the peace she lost, nor cast away the golden cord that glittered while it galled her. Expecting daily to see Abel pass her window, as had been his habit previously to her illness, and each day being disappointed, she lost heart, till at last she could not resist concluding in her own mind that she had unwittingly offended him. Day after day, as she rose and prepared slowly to sit by her window, she puzzled her head with a thousand problems in trying to account for his absence. Still she was doomed to disappointment. Had she been indebted to one of her own sex for the timely assistance rendered her in the most critical moment of her life, she could have spoken freely enough about the matter; she could have asked a thousand questions about the person in whom she had naturally become much interested. That person being Abel Armstrong, deprived her of the power to converse upon the subject. So sure as she tried to talk of him she failed mysteriously: her heart seemed to say that his name was sacred, that it must only be uttered sparingly. Each morning she thought that the evening-time would surely relieve her of her suspense: it could not now be long before she should see him. Poor Chrissie! she had to wait and content herself as best she could with hearing a few words as they dropped indiscriminately from Mrs. Armstrong now and then, to the effect that Abel was working himself to death; or that he had

carted so much corn on the previous day, and had almost fallen asleep over his supper. All this was a source of great anxiety to Chrissie ; though no one would have suspected it from her countenance, as she sat with her face on her hand leaning slightly out of her window, hoping to catch the sound of certain footsteps or a sight of the figure she longed to see ; her baby-like face was as free from care as the breeze that played in her flowing hair. There she would sit by the hour, a living picture in a blossoming frame of foliage and flowers in high relief, formed by the rose and jessamine that covered the front of her rustic home and climbed to her latticed window, interlacing each other as they aspired to the old thatched roof, diffusing a delicious fragrance from the clustering flowers that studded the luxuriant foliage.

It was well for Abel's peace of mind just now that he was compelled to exert himself about his business. The excessive heat of the weather had ripened field after field of corn more rapidly than the farmers had anticipated or were prepared for. Valuable standing wheat was bending for the sickle, here and there showing signs of being about to rid itself of part of the cherished grain by an obvious readiness to let it fall if visited by a brisk wind or a sharp shower. Great indeed was the number of labourers about ; but these being wanted everywhere at the same time, the demand for them was still greater ; so that in the press of the harvest there was really a dearth of hands ; and everyone belonging to the place who could render

assistance was pressed into the field. For six days successively Abel worked on now without respite for sixteen hours a day during five weeks, while the heat was almost intolerable ; not a single shower having fallen during the whole of that time to relieve the oppressiveness that had come over the labourers working on a burning soil, that was opening in numerous fissures to the intense rays of unremitted heat.

Sunshine is very agreeable in shady groves, where its light and heat are subdued by myriads of green leaves fluttering with fresh life, rising height above height in stately grandeur from majestic trees ; where one may stroll at leisure, or lie down and contemplate the deep blue summer sky in thousands of kaleidoscopic shapes, varying every moment with the shifting leaves, the light subdued and tender as a timid maiden's love, while the gentle moving foliage invites the passing breeze, and zephyr dances gaily in the branches, chasing and embracing every leaf, lingering, dallying, rocking in fond luxuriance the sheltered singing birds perched on the swaying twigs or playing in the boughs ; when the soft air swarms with joyous insect life, and each ephemeral being, whirling in delight, is spending its little term in one gay round of pleasure, filling the ambient air with a mystic hum, like a distant echo of voices from regions far above. While one is taking his ease in such a refuge, his mind perhaps building some airy castle for the pleasure of this world, or cogitating on some million years of happiness it hopes for in the next, life may be toler-

able even in the intensest heat of a harvest-day. Or if one has been wielding nothing heavier than a pen, the working of a couple of oars on the water may be agreeable for a few hours even on the warmest day, when the perspiration on one's brow heightens a man's dignity by reminding him of the fact that he is exerting himself in no bad cause, as he triumphs in bearing the fatigues of the heat and the blisters on his fingers. But this is for a short duration, and it is for pleasure. Very different is the effect of the sun, all glowing and life-giving as it is, when in the harvest field it sends its scorching rays in unmitigated severity down upon the labourer ; specially so if he happen to be weakly and, after working for a few days, to find himself worn and jaded, when his want of appetite and rest and shelter bids him quench his distressing thirst in the beverage provided by our English caterers, which often only increases the disorder ; till weakened and inflamed, his brain reels, and by continuous exposure to the sun, he sinks helpless for a time, perhaps for ever, smitten by 'sun-stroke.'

Fortunately for Abel Armstrong his condition was not such as to foster this complaint. He was not weak, nor was he improvident. He prized his health as one of the greatest gifts of God ; as such he was vigilantly careful to keep it in order : his own favourite maxim in after life being that, "To eat too much or to starve, to drink too freely or to thirst for long together, to lie a bed in a morning when the day wakes up, or to be up and unrested while the night invites to sleep,

to work too hard or be idle, to hanker after money or be negligent of it, are all sins of deeper dye than we generally reckon them to be, and all tend to the pulling down of that mysterious fabric, the body, which required an Almighty power to build up."

The harvest was ready for the gathering in, and the reapers were but few. Abel, finding all the extraneous help he could muster to be very inadequate to his exigencies, set himself to the work he saw before him. Persevering swiftly and quietly, he accomplished as much as three hired men in the same time, working till the last sheaf was hoisted on the last rick at a late and weary hour in the evening, it being nine o'clock.

On the following evening the harvest men partook of an abundant supper, consisting of enormous plum-puddings and a huge round of beef, with an unlimited supply of home-brewed ale. For this purpose the large barn was cleared out and prepared with tressels and planks to form two long tables parallel with each other. These were covered with white cloths, graced at the two chief ends with Abel and his father, both flanked and over-canopied with evergreens. The feast was more glad than brilliant; the guests being voracious before supper and obtuse after, until four of the number being moved by the occasion to the practice of their vocal talents called upon each other for songs. They sang by turns with glee, assisting each other in the choruses, till at length the entire company, incited by such inspiration as could be imbibed from the horn cups, stumbled over the last few bars in bringing up

the rear, halting and leaping, but determined withal to be *in*. One song found so much favour as to be encored vehemently, in unpolished language it is true, and not without threats of violence in case of the vocalist refusing to comply with the request. This was readily and with a certain degree of good humour acceded to, and again the song was sung. By this time the refrain had become familiar, and the whole company joined in it uproariously. To do credit to their taste, it must be acknowledged that this was the least objectionable song of the evening. It contained the sentiment that the spring was the true season for love, as testified everywhere around by the feathered tribe; then a protest from one "lovely Angelina" to her present admirer, who, being a landsman, living by the sea, fears a rival in a "long-haired sailor-boy," whom Angelina assevers, in pathetic terms, she never loved, when in the supreme enjoyment of reconciliation the lovers imbibe bliss from the cuckoo calling out just then, and they gratefully sing an apostrophe to the bird. This forming the chorus, the harvestmen joined in. Commencing by a note of D flat, given through the nose, they swelled the full strain out in vigorous style, and in accordance with their own conception of English pronunciation. After the nasal note the chorus ran thus :—

"Cukoo, cukoo, peretty careeter,  
Now procle-aims the lovelye springn.  
Listen tew the voice of Nater !  
Ark ! I ere the cukoo singn."

The harvest-home at last being over, and the principal portion of the business of the year achieved, Abel began to plume himself for the freedom which he had so well earned. After setting a few remaining details to rights, and seeing old Jonas mounted, ready to begin the thatching of the wheat-stacks, he set about thinking right seriously how he could see Chrissie Bloomfield again. Lately he had had no time to ascertain whether his visits would be acceptable to her or not. He had to content himself with making inquiries about her, calling, as opportunity afforded, on Sundays, when her mother, after a few kind civilities, allowed him to take his leave, hoping, as she said, to see him as soon as Chrissie should be down again. All this time he was urgent to see her; he regretted that her home was not situated between his farm and his fields, that he might see her now and again at her window as he passed to and fro. But he had no excuse to go that way with the hope of catching a sight of her, and no *finesse* to aid him; so there was nothing for him but to abide his time, waiting day after day without realising his fondest ambition; while, as he tantalized himself with the thought, a number of little urchins who did not value the sight could see her at her window half-a-dozen times a day.

Abel now paid what in our fashionable circles would be considered a morning visit, but which at Grayworth was thought somewhat late in the afternoon. It was three o'clock. Mrs. Bloomfield, in a clean white apron,

sat at her spinning-wheel, with her door wide open, so as to enjoy the fresh air, and get a glance or a friendly word from any well-known neighbour who might be passing by.

"Good day, Mrs. Bloomfield," said Abel, as he approached the door. "I hope I see you well."

"Very well, thank thee, Abel. How's theeself? Come in; sit down. Thou'st been o'erworked lately, I fear, wi' th' harvest work."

"Ah, yes," said Abel, "I've been rather pressed for the last few weeks. Father is but weakly, you see. But we must take things a little easier now," he continued, going up to chirp at the bird in the cage. "I've come, Mrs. Bloomfield, to see how Chrissie is. It's a long time now since I saw her. She's getting on nicely, I hear, though."

"Why, dear me!" said Mrs. Bloomfield, seeming to be struck with a sense of ingratitude at not having invited him to see her earlier, "thou hastno' seen her since the day thee brought her home bad from the field, yonder!"

"No," said Abel; he tried to add—"I should like to see her," but his throat swelled up at the moment he got out the monosyllabic negative; he could proceed no further.

"Well, then," she said, "if thee'll just stay a bit, her'll be down directly; her gets down now i'th' afternoon and sits up to have her tea; and then her goes up stairs again and rests her back a little on some



cushions and things your mother and me fixed against th' window."

"Is she getting strong again?" said Abel, gaining in courage.

"Oh, yes! her's getting on famously now; her wanted to go out this morning; but I dare-no' trust her for fear it should be too much for her strength."

"Well," said Abel, "would she go a little way to-morrow if I go with her to take care of her? I could carry her, you see," he added with simplicity, "if she gets too tired to walk back."

"Oh," said Mrs. Bloomfield, smiling, "thou'rt too good, Abel; we'll see what her thinks herself about taking a little walk. I should think her might go if her took care only to go a little way at first, and not to try her strength too much. Here her comes," she said, as her daughter's footsteps were heard upon the stairs.

Abel's heart throbbed as he listened to the sound and filled himself with the idea of whence it proceeded. He looked for a moment as bewildered as a frightened calf; but recovering himself moderately well by the time Chrissie entered the room, he advanced to meet her with the best air he could assume, which after all was not bad, his face and figure being so good as to cover any little shortcomings in the matter of coolness. "I thought it was your voice, Abel," said Chrissie, as he pressed her hand gently. "How do you do? I hope you are quite well."

"Yes, thank you," said Abel, "I'm always well, you

know ! I came on purpose to see how *you* are, that's the principal question."

"Thank you, do sit down," she said, as her mother led her to the low comfortable seat prepared for her. "I am very much better ; indeed I felt this morning that I should like a little change of air ; but mother is so careful of me," she added, smiling, "that she wouldn't let me venture out ; though I'm sure I'm quite well enough."

"I'm thinking," said Abel, "whether it wouldn't be better for you to have a *drive* for the first time getting out, after being in doors so long ? I'll take you with pleasure, if you think you are strong enough to sit up in the gig."

"Oh, thank thee, Abel," said her mother ; "that would be encroaching too much upon kindness."

"It would be very nice though !" said Chrissie ingenuously ;—she was pining for fresh air as a daisy under a cloud pines for sunshine. "But what would your father think, Abel ? You couldn't take the horse without permission of him or your mother."

"You remember poor Sandy, Abel ?" said Mrs. Bloomfield.

"I couldn't very easily forget the poor beast," said Abel.

"Not that I have any doubt but that Chrissie would be quite safe," said Mrs. Bloomfield. "But at all events we must have thy mother's consent."

"Hum," returned Abel with an air of amusement, as he rose to take his hat, "there's no occasion to ask

about such a thing ; but of course I'll do it for your satisfaction."

" Well, then, Abel," said Mrs. Bloomfield, " when thee come back again, will thee stay and have tea wi' us? there's nobody at home but Chrissie and me and the baby : the others took their ' four o'clock ' to th' bean field wi' em. They'r'n not coming home till dusk."

" Thank you," said Abel, " I'll come almost directly ; but I'll just run and ask mother about the horse ; and then we can settle afterwards about the time for the drive in the morning. Good-bye for the present," and he bounded off like a stag in a forest.

His mother was superintending the making of some pikelets for tea. He told her of his proposition for a drive, adding that neither Chrissie nor her mother would hear of it without her authority.

" Why, to be sure, my lad," exclaimed Mrs. Armstrong, " it's just the thing. My head must ha' been gone a wool-gathering or I should ha' thought of it myself! That's exactly what she wants, poor little lass, it'll help set her up. I should like to see her myself. I think, Abel, I'll go over." She directed Betty to finish the pikelets and to stir some tea-cakes, and then went, as she said, to clean herself, though she was particularly clean at the time.

Betty took a large basin to the flour bin, whisked with it into the dairy, added from the various receptacles there one thing after another—eggs, butter, and cream that doubled up into thick yellow folds

as she brought the spoon to the side of the milk-pan, then mixed the whole together, divided it hastily, and set the cakes on the heated stone to bake. They were nearly done by the time Mrs. Armstrong had changed her gown and given some directions to the men in the yard. She took up the cakes and pikelets in a clean cloth, and walked over with them to Mrs. Bloomfield's.

"Well, Mrs. Bloomfield," she said, as she entered the house, "Abel tells me he's going to have tea wi' you. I was just making some pikelets when he came in, so I thought I'd bring 'em wi' me and invite myself to have a cup o' tea wi' you. I got Betty to stir two or three tea-cakes, for I know you've had plenty to do since Chrissie's been bad."

"Well, now, to think o' that," said Mrs. Bloomfield; "thee needsno' ha' gone to the trouble, though it's very thoughtful, to be sure. I was just goin' to stir some myself, but Lucy's gone to milk th' cows, and Chrissie isno' well enough to hold baby much; so you see I've got my hands a little tied for th' present. I'm very glad thou'rt come. We've been talking about thee several times the last two or three days. Do sit thee down."

Lucy—the maid—came in with a mug of frothing new milk, fresh from the cow, for Chrissie; and then went and brought a jug of rich-coloured cream from the dairy, and tea was soon prepared.

The chat went on merrily. The baby, who was allowed even by the male sex to be a very fine specimen,

came in for a great share of attention, and did honour to the guests by crowing and laughing as only humanity can crow and laugh before it knows the sorrows of teething. Abel did but little talking, though he felt never so happy. Seeing the baby laugh at him, he took it from its mother's arms; but nursing being a new occupation to him, he held it as if he were handling a great sponge, or something altogether too tender for his Samsonian muscles to deal with; he seemed all the time to be trying to come to the right adjustment of matters, but without success.

The two mothers laughed outright at him. "Why, Abel, lad!" said Mrs. Armstrong, "thee might be hugging a sucking pig, to see how thee take hold o' th' little darling!"

"Law! bless thy life!" said Mrs. Bloomfield, "men always maul babies about so, and bundle their clothes up all of a heap, as if they forget the little dears ha' got arms and legs, or else they're frightened to touch their pretty flesh."

But the laughing and the lecturing were all lost upon Abel; he did not improve, though he persisted for a time in nursing. He was fond of all young things, children included when they were not too young. He liked this little one, young as it was, because it was Chrissie's sister. Chrissie nursed and tended it; that was enough to give it a claim upon Abel's heart.

The tea and the talk ended to the satisfaction of every one. It was agreed that Abel was to take the gig, and call for Chrissie at nine o'clock the next morning,

and that on their return she and her mother should dine at the Armstrongs, off a well-fatted goose, and some fresh water fish, which old Mr. Armstrong had just brought in from an expedition he had made to one of the neighbouring trout-streams.





## CHAPTER VIII.

### HOW ABEL PROPOSED.

What is life when wanting love ?  
Night without a morning ;  
Love's the cloudless summer sun,  
Nature gay adorning.

BURNS.

THE next morning shed over the landscape a profusion of beauty such as is enjoyed in the country with a quietness peculiarly its own. Even in the city such a time is not without its blessings. The friendly letters, though few they be, that are written in places where warehouses abound, are written on such a morning as this in a friendlier spirit than usual. Even the countenance of "the man on 'change" is less cadaverous, his expression more genial. Wood Street and Fore Street rub their hands and greet the hopeful country as it comes up to exchange its money for their useful and ornamental wares, and actually condescend to talk of the weather, the only matter in the world upon which all men can frankly agree.

Abel Armstrong rose at four o'clock that morning. He was seldom known to give himself up to the

pleasures of imagination, but having put on his "buskins to resist the morning dew," he left his dog, for once, in the kennel, and strode the fields with only his stick for company, wondering, as he endeavoured to realise a foretaste of the happiness before him, how he should acquit himself with Chrissie. He arranged in his mind several different modes in which to present himself before her. Once or twice he stood still to collect his scattered thoughts and assure himself that he was not in a dream; then upon assuring himself that he was wide awake, he was amazed at the thought of his proximate bliss: his heart palpitated and beat against his breast to the dire confusion of all his arrangements of mode and speech. Yet that the day, great for his opportunity, had arrived, was certain. What should he say, how should he act? At first he contemplated kneeling, as the proper attitude in which to declare to Chrissie that his whole being was devoted to her. He had read how the knights of old knelt; doubtless it was the right thing for a gentleman to do on such an occasion. He had never heard of the necessity of adopting this mode among any of the members of his own family; but he was inexperienced. Then he recollected that he should be driving, and the position he meditated might prove awkward; so he abandoned the idea, as being, under the circumstances, impracticable. Still believing that so great an occasion demanded an extraordinary effort, he racked his brains for an hour or so, devising some grandiloquent form in which to express his adoration to Christiana. All to no purpose. When



nine o'clock arrived, he failed not to set himself face to face with the gentle little lady ; but all at once he found that he had left his resolutions far behind him somewhere on the wings of the wind. In vain did he try to recall them. He sent back his thoughts to the place where he had walked while meditating some specially agreeable and proper little form of address. But the answer was a blank. He had to depend upon the genius of the moment for his inspiration.

That morning was to Chrissie the dawn of a new life. All things were propitious for her. The parched land, revived by a copious fall of rain, glowed again with living beauty. The drooping vegetation, that had been dried and scorched by several weeks' unclouded sun, now stood out in fresh relief, as if loth to part with the refreshing rain-drops standing on every leaf and hanging here and there in rows of crystals brighter than pearls from wreaths of various shape and colour. Glad birds flitted about and rushed from tree to tree in ecstasies ; the land, swelling up as if in gratitude for the bounteous shower, sent up a sweet incense of fresh odours ; the cattle in the fields, even the dullest creature, seemed sensible of the change. Abel and Chrissie needed not the addition of fair weather to their cup of contentment—it was full to overflowing, almost overpowering. They were not forgetful of the splendour of the time, though little was said on either side as they drove slowly up the magnificent slope of the great Bretwalda hill, where one of the finest panoramas of the country was stretched out all before them.

The rapid floating of bright flocculent clouds across the intensely blue sky varied the light of the ever varying prospect. Just as the happy pair reached the summit of the hill the light clouds dispersed, the sun cleared away the mist and now lit up the whole picture with a warm fresh glow. Through the valley ran the river broad and clear, its rich banks studded with woods in the full prime of luxuriance. A vast robe of living green, redundant with excess of verdure, was the sloping undulating pasture-land, dotted with the sleek, wholesome-looking cattle, grazing peaceably on the landscape here and there from the hill top down to the river side, while the blue dome of the sky above seemed to rest quietly on the hills at the horizon. A farm or a homestead nestled snugly here and there in a little cul-de-sac. The curling smoke that sailed away above the waving trees in odd sequestered nooks along the vale told that other quiet nests of humanity lodged there. A high church spire pointed the wanderer where to look for guidance when, like Job, he sought for aid forward and backward, on the right hand and on the left, everywhere but upwards. The memories of the 'once mighty dead' around its base, the whole picture before him, the river, the old, old hills, brought vividly to Abel's mind the scenes he had loved to read about in the long winter evenings, of old heroic deeds done in the days of chivalry, when the King of Mercia held that same land by the power of his battle-axe, and the Derwent and the Dove, so sweetly placid now, were often stained with human blood. Scarcely a word had

yet been spoken by the lovers since they started, excepting such as, "Are you well wrapped up, Chrissie?" "Yes, thank you." "Feel warm enough?" "Quite warm." "Hope you are not tired?" "Not at all tired. Very comfortable." Excepting this, Chrissie was the first to speak. Looking eagerly over the landscape as they reached the hill-top, she exclaimed, "Oh! what a lively sight! I wish you would stop a moment, Abel, to listen to the birds. Delicious! delicious!" she repeated, as the wheels suddenly stopped, and no sound was heard but a thousand joyous notes from a thousand feathered throats, all without discord. No leader was visible there. Not one in that vast choir was detected sounding his A for the concert; yet all were in harmony. The whole together concerting charming music in the grand unpillared temple with the illimitable heavens its cupola.

"I wonder," said Chrissie, as they drove quietly on, "how people *can* live in a town. When I was at Derby, it seemed so dull and smoky, I couldn't think how the daylight could ever get into the houses; there were so many streets and walls and roofs; and the walls looked so naked and cold, not even ivy or flowers growing upon them. Do you think, Abel, that it is because the flowers like the fresh air and can't grow where it is so smoky? How dull the poor creatures must be who are obliged to live in such places.

"Yes," said Abel, sympathetically, "though I suppose they get used to it: but I should not like to

change places with them. Do you know, Chrissie, they say that this is one of the best views in the whole county."

"I should think," said Chrissie, "that it is the best view in all *England*, or anywhere else. I'm sure I should never like anything in all the wide world better ! Should you, Abel ?"

He answered by asking a question: "Well, now, Chrissie, out of all the things that you can see, which should you like best if you could have your choice ?"

"Oh, I like them all as well as one another."

"Ah ! but that's not fair," said Abel. "Suppose now that you lived in a town, and you might choose to take any one of all the things now around you. Which of them would you have ?"

"Why," said Chrissie, "they are all so large ! the town wouldn't hold them ; but I think I like the birds best—only I like them in the *trees* ! I *must* have the trees, you know," she said, laughing, "or the birds wouldn't sing."

"Then," said Abel, "you like the birds and the trees best, do you ?"

"Yes, but not without the fields, and the hills, and the river."

"Oh ! you are greedy !" said Abel, smiling and shaking his head, "you want so many things. But just think for a moment. Is there not any object in particular that you would prefer to every thing else ?"

Abel being almost as simple-hearted as Chrissie herself, thought this very clever diplomacy on his

part. But the meaning of its mystery did not penetrate her vision. Her eyes were honestly set. She was not in the habit of looking askance, and could only see that which was plain before her. So Abel beat about the bush for some time without startling the bird. At length he said, "Well, Chrissie, you don't ask me what I should like best of all the things I can see."

"Well, then," said Chrissie, "which *would* you like best."

"I shouldn't like to live in a town, I must confess," said Abel; "but I *could* live in a town, very happily too, if I might only take with me something that I *could* choose in a moment if I might have it."

"You couldn't take the country to the town any way," said Chrissie. "If you could take the river it would get dirty: it wouldn't be nice, as it is down by the trees there, as clear as a looking-glass!"

"It isn't the river I want, Chrissie," said Abel in a little agitation, as if he thought she were trifling with him.

But her enthusiasm at the scenery soon convinced him of his error. He saw by her straightforward look that she had no clue to his enigma; and he repented his momentary injustice of thought the instant he looked at her. "She's as pure as an angel and as beautiful as a queen," he thought, as she looked up straight into his face with a childish, bewitching grace of her own as if she were challenging him. "Well, then, Abel! whatever can it be?"

Abel prevented her from finishing her sentence.

He declared afterwards that he "couldn't help it,"—that he "didn't know how it came about," that he "really didn't mean to do it." But his arm was round her little neck and his lips were on her fresh young face almost before he knew what he was about. He was shocked the next instant at his own boldness. Taking up the reins hurriedly he began to apologise, fearing he might have proved himself not over gentle.

If Chrissie was slow at comprehending roundabout hints, she had all the quickness of the keenest of her sex to grasp in a moment, to a certainty, anything that was put in a clear light before her ; and the light that Abel showed his love in just then was unmistakably clear as well as warm. But Chrissie felt a little shy : not but that she thoroughly confided in Abel's goodness, and in no way mistrusted him. His love was very pleasant to her ; but she was a true woman, though a very young one. She listened with unaffected modesty to the voice within, which Nature plants in every maiden's heart to guard her virtue with a jealous care. She thought no other man on earth could be so handsome and so ably generous as he, and did brave battle with her own heart while trying to keep her secret to herself, longing all the time to tell him how ready she was to reciprocate his love. She held herself reserved for a time, knowing that too much freedom was occasionally practised in the neighbourhood, which she had neither the taste nor the inclination for. The thought of this perhaps led her to take the matter seriously as she called to mind two or three maiden

ladies of her own acquaintance of whom it was frequently said, "They have been great flirts in their time." Chrissie found herself in a little quiet study, wondering whether she should be in the future a maiden or a matron. "If she were to be a wife! and if Abel were to be her husband! Oh! if such an event should be!" The thought turned her face crimson just as Abel ventured to take his eyes off the distant horizon to look at her. He thought she did not look annoyed. There was something in the innocent face that encouraged him. She could not dislike him or she would be vexed at his rudeness. Why did she blush so? Perhaps she loved him! "Chrissie," he said, softly, "I didn't mean to offend you. Will you forgive me?"

"I'm not quite sure that I shall," said Chrissie, casting an arch look at him; "it all depends upon how you behave in future!"

"Well, Chrissie, I'll behave just as you wish in future, if you will only tell me what your wish is."

"It is that you behave like a *man*, Abel," she said, smiling. "You can't do better than that, you know."

"But what sort of a man do you mean? A married man or a single man? If I'm to behave like a single man, I can't promise much for myself, I fear; but if I'm to be a married man, then I'll do everything you like."

"Oh, Abel! what a fib you must be telling! Whatever have *I* to do with it?" said Chrissie, with a little anxious mock-laugh, as she turned pale.

"You have *all* to do with it, Chrissie," returned

Abel, seriously. "If I marry, you will be my wife. I have thought of it long and long ago, and I shall never alter my mind. If you wish me to be happy, you have only to give me your consent, with the whole of this little heart of yours, and your will is mine as long as we live."

Chrissie tried to look as if she thought very little about it herself, as she answered, "But what would mother say, Abel?" Her lips turned white, in spite of herself, and her head almost sank upon his shoulders.

Abel pulled up the reins abruptly. "How fast old Tommy wants to go. There, Chrissie, just look at the girth of that beech-tree," he said, pointing to one of enormous magnitude. He indicated several other phenomena, but did not succeed in bringing the natural colour into Chrissie's face. "Why, you look tired," he said, with a quiet smile. "Shall I get out and leave the gig here, and carry you home in my arms again?"

"Don't, Abel," she said, a little provoked at the allusion.

"Very well; I won't. I told you I'd do just as you liked. This next lane, Chrissie," he said, speaking now in a low serious tone, "will lead us directly home. When we turn the corner, I shall want you to tell me whether you can love me or not. I'm very particular about having the love of my wife, Chrissie," he added, with a sly look that made her laugh; "so I must have a good hearty *yes* or a good hearty *no*. Do you understand?"

Chrissie smiled. After they had gone a little distance down the lane, Abel allowed the horse to walk. Then



putting his arm gently round Chrissie's waist, he said, "Now, then, Chrissie! Time's up! I can't wait any longer for an answer. *Yes or no!* Do you love me? I don't mean *can* you love me; but *do* you love me?"

Chrissie turned and leaned her face partly upon his shoulder: her looks spoke more than any words of the confidence she placed in him.

"Does that spell yes," he said, as he kissed her fervently.

"You are so rich in strength, Abel, and I'm afraid that I am rather weakly; but I can never love any one else, I'm sure. I hope I shall make you a good wife; but I'm so happy that I am afraid I shall cry." Abel took care not to let her cry.

They returned home slowly as they had come, having driven fifteen miles in three hours. True the horse was not of the rarest breed, the harness was none of the brightest, nor was the 'gig' specially elegant; but the hearts of the occupants were light enough to illumine all with *colour-de-rose*. The equipage of royalty itself could not have added to their bliss, nor the viands of a palace to their appetite, as they sat down to a well-spread table, in all the glow of first fresh love gilded with bright hopes. Dinner over and good humour prevailing, their friends had the sagacity to guess the issue of the drive. Chrissie hung down her head in confusion at old Mr. Armstrong's sly jokes, and Abel was scarcely less embarrassed as he revealed in a half ambiguous confession the real state of matters between himself and the happy little lady blushing by his side.



## CHAPTER IX.

### WILL'S WOOING.

Stronger than steel  
Is the sword of the spirit;  
Swifter than arrows  
The life of the truth is;  
Greater than anger  
Is love, and subdueth.

LONGFELLOW.

THE happy dawn that commonly succeeds the gloom had now burst upon Abel in all its promise of a long, bright day. The uncertainty as to whether he should be accepted by Christiana had kept his mind for some weeks past in a constant state of perturbation; and that at a time when, to make things worse, he was deprived the company of his old companion and confidant, William Brown. That young gentleman's exuberant spirits during six days of the week, and his absence from Grayworth on the seventh, had only irritated Abel the more; knowing, as he did, that the cause of his friend's unclouded happiness lay in a straightforward course of true love, which, for once,

did run smooth. And much as Abel esteemed his friend, he could not but feel the contrast a little damping to his own spirits.

Will had been tempted of late to stray away every Sunday some four miles westward ; where a fugitive little spirit in the form of a small stream had somehow gained its liberty from a neighbouring spring, and went dancing and skipping along, wide away from the Dove over an irregular bed of limestone, now dashing wildly by a bare rent rock, now leaping playfully at the foot of a stately precipice in rich attire, that waved its acknowledgments in verdant smiles and bent its flowery tresses over the bounding stream : it passed on threading its way through ferny grottos and secluded glens, over crags and flower-fringed banks, till at last it reached an open glade where it expanded ; then dividing into streamlets and dispersing itself over a broad patch of green meadow-land, it seemed to fructify, yielding an unlimited supply of pasturage, children, and cattle. Not that it was the pasturage, the children, or the cattle in particular that Will Brown went to see : it was bonny Ursula Woodford, a young lady whose powers of attraction were strong enough to fascinate his pure and simple heart, even had he been at the antipodes after once being smitten with the enchanting influence of her face and form. Every day in the week, while his hand was at the harrow or the plough, his thoughts, assisted by tender memories, were at Elmford. Scarcely did he allow time for the sun of the seventh day to gleam through his chamber

window and light on his ready eyelids, ere he was up and on his way, lively as the early bird, to the peaceful village which had loomed for him a hopeful haven in the distance from early Monday morning.

It was bliss for Will to stand and chat with Ursula while she milked the cows, as farmers' daughters did in those days, deeming it too nice an operation for any but a delicate and responsible hand. It happened quite as often, however, that Will was silent by her side ; so that he was near her it mattered not to him ; her presence was his happiness. To church in company with each other, then home to dinner. To stroll in the green lanes,

" Where violets breathe their sweetest vows  
And bine and bramble wed."

To walk about the farm, holding consultation regarding the merits of the various kinds of milking cows and other cattle for the thrifty husbandry they hoped to be engaged in, and then to speak in low and confidential accents of the marriage, to tea, and start for Grayworth in good time, was for many Sundays the unaltered order of the day with Ursula and Will.

But though Will started early he did not always arrive at Grayworth by the rustic hour of eight ; beyond which time it was considered imprudent for any swain or lass to be from home ; for Ursula—it was the woman tempted him from the straight path—insisted upon going a little way along the road with him, and Will could never leave her to return alone. Thus did Cupid beguile them of the time, and keep

them lingering on the way till often it was nine o'clock at night when Will reached home. Such an immoral hour was not to be indulged in at Grayworth with impunity. Many a scolding did Will get from his parents; and not a few hints that Ursula Woodford was not a very likely lass to do him good, since she thought fit to encourage him to stay out till such a shameful time of night. But Ursula and Will persisted in the same insubordinate line of conduct till the autumn, when their approaching wedding brought them to the culminating point of their long hope.

This hope, however, was deferred for a time, in consequence of the death of Abel Armstrong's father, who had suffered from a chronic ailment of many years; and just as everybody seemed to reckon that he had settled down for a long life-evening, to be divided between the tranquillising banks of the pleasant fishing streams and his comfortable arm chair in the chimney corner, a shock ran through the neighbourhood one midnight as the skeleton with crown and sceptre suddenly appeared, beckoning the good old man, and he was quietly 'gathered to his fathers.'

The fish caught to be eaten in honour of his son's happiness might have coldly furnished forth his own funeral feast; for he died a few days subsequently, after having duly pronounced on the previous evening, when he appeared to be in his usual state of health, his blessing on the children, as he called Abel and Chrissie. He expressed, on that occasion, a wish that they should be united without delay; hoping that if

it should please God to keep him here below much longer, his pain might be mitigated by the merry prattle of their children, who should accompany him on all his fishing excursions, even though their gambols should startle away all the fish.

At the time of his decease the preparations for Ursula's marriage were complete. But she would not consent to be married until such time as was considered necessary to intervene between the sad event and the marriage of Abel and Chrissie should elapse, as it had been agreed that the two couples should be united at the same time at the same altar. Ursula having obtained the consent of her indulgent fiancé, it was arranged that she should leave Elmford at once, and come and spend the intervening time with Chrissie and her mother, where she could assist in their preparations as well as interest herself in several matters in course of arrangement at Mapleberry Farm, her future home.

The body of Abel's father had to be consigned to its last resting place. Will Brown and Ursula Woodford had become so bound up with the interests of the Armstrongs, that they had come, within the last few days, to be as one family. Love had united them in a closer bond of attachment than had ever before existed between them : and though death had snatched away the orange blossoms from the girls and substituted immortelles, it was death that cemented the bond which was never more to be severed but by death. Ursula and Chrissie resignedly laid aside their robes of

the altar for the sombre drapery of the tomb ; and the impatient youths subdued their ardour,—Abel at his father's grave, Will at the shrine of friendship. Strength and beauty took fallen decrepitude and laid it in the quiet churchyard.

Besides the mournful little group of friends that closed around the coffin as it lay in its narrow sunken bed there was a stranger who had come to officiate for the good rector. A very young man the stranger was, named Mr. Benson. Having just come out from the furnace of affliction, his wounds were still unhealed, and the marks of his trials were visible on his countenance. He appeared at this time much older than he really was : though twenty years later he was much older than he appeared to be. This young gentleman had been highly recommended to the rector of Grayworth by a learned vicar in the neighbourhood ; and the rector soon found an inestimable blessing in the man who, through death and misfortune, had been led there so very young. As Mr. Benson proceeded to read the service at the grave, all attention was attracted to his pale face and his earnest eyes, which appeared to be looking far outward, while he seemed to lose all sense of himself as he repeated, in striking tones of prophetic weight, the words, "Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. The dead shall be raised incorruptible. The sting of death is *sin*. Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

It was evident to the mourners that these words had

taken deep hold of the speaker himself; who in his turn had made a deeper impression upon them and upon the great number of bystanders than had ever been made in that place in the memory of living man, even by the solemn and impressive service for the burial of the dead.

Very consoling was this service from such a source. Especially comforting was it to the relict of the deceased. A sympathetic link was at once established between the young minister and the whole circle at the grave as he shook hands with the bereaved at parting, promising Mrs. Armstrong an early visit.







## CHAPTER X.

### TWO HAPPY MARRIAGES.

Sweet roses grace the thorny way  
Along this vale of sorrow ;  
The flowers that shed their leaves to-day,  
Shall bloom again to-morrow.

MONTGOMERY.

WHEN two months had closed quietly over the grave, life seemed suddenly invested with new importance to the lovers for the time that had been lost to them. The extra stir and bustle at each of the three houses interested in the movement told that the wedding was very near. Chrissie and Ursula drew out their white muslin dresses, and embroidery that had taken the spare hours of years to work was laid upon them for the day, to be taken off again, and washed and folded, and carefully laid by — perhaps for a christening, or it might be for another wedding twenty years hence.

As the time drew near the girls felt some doubt as to whether the new curate was the right person to marry them, arguing that as he was so dreadfully at home in the awful presence of the dead, he could not but be absent in the livelier duties at the altar ; that if he

should have the conducting of the marriage ceremony it was much to be feared that he would cast an unwelcome gloom over the whole party. But when the time came they found to their surprise and delight that Mr. Benson was not gloomy, nor even solemn, after the ceremony was over. Whatever his own private sorrows may have been, he had put them all aside for the day, as Chrissie and Ursula had their black garments ; and his welcome company proved an agreeable addition to the wedding party. From that time he was on the best of terms, not only with the Browns and Armstrongs, but with most of the better-informed portion of the parishioners.

The preparations for the wedding were carried out to the satisfaction of every one who partook of them. Everything was orderly, excepting as here and there a friend who, accustomed to spend his time in the open air, vowed that the autumn fire and the bright light sparkling from the eyes of all the ladies present stimulated and provoked his merriment beyond the bounds of moderation, as indeed it appeared. The expenses incurred were very moderate. Mrs. Bloomfield found an abundance of help in the commissariat. Neighbours and friends sent heaps of flowers ; and who so good at making delicate trifles as Mrs. Armstrong ? Mrs. Brown was not behind with a variety of cakes ; and Ursula, with her swift, plump hand, made quantities of pastry that would not have disgraced an emperor's table.

The day was bright and clear. Most of the inhabi-

tants of the village and the farms about flocked to the church at ten o'clock. The squire and his lady honoured the occasion with their presence at church; but the rector was from home, for the benefit of his health: and Doctor Perry, from private reasons of his own, declined to be prevailed upon to go and see a wedding. "No, no," he said, with a shake of the head, in answer to an interrogation from the squire, who encountered him on the road; "let the poor wretches go and put their heads into nooses who will! I've washed my hands of that sort of thing; and I'll keep my distance."

"Ah! indeed," said the squire, as if recollecting himself, "I heard about that affair of yours at Bankstone; I congratulate you upon being out of it just in the nick of time," and with his usual courteous, "Good day, Doctor," the one went towards the church, the other in the opposite direction.

"Devil take the whole concern, and his big-eyed she-imp into the bargain," muttered the doctor to himself. "But I should think Squire Godfrey will have the good sense to keep it to himself!"

To keep his "distance" and his word at the same time, having little else to do just then, Doctor Perry walked away over the fields; whence, as he knew, he could get a view of the two brides with the bridegrooms on their way from church. The doctor had vowed eternal celibacy, thoroughly convinced in his own mind that it was in accordance with a philosophical resolution arrived at from experience that he

hated all women. Yet there was nothing pleased him more than to see a gentle, sprightly lass dressed in white muslin. He looked upon such an one thus dressed with the same admiration as he looked upon any other picture; this being his favourite one, he regarded it in the highest degree. When once the lass was denuded of her flowing robe, however, the picture for the doctor lost its charms; or at least he made himself believe so.

Clash! went the merry bells before the church was cleared. Ursula, blooming and smiling, and Chrissie blushing deeply, were led home by the youths, supremely happy, as peal after peal saluted them all through the bright-green meadows. The sun that had been clouded for a fortnight past till yesterday, now shone out in all its splendour, brightening every crevice of the scenery. As it lighted on the two brides and brought their youth and beauty out in rich relief, Abel could find no words in which to express his admiration, so he summed it up in one brief exclamation,—“Glorious!”

“It *is* glorious,” said Will in a slight under-tone. “This is the happiest day o’ my life, Abel. I shall be glad though when we get home: for I don’t like to walk so straight and stiff, when all the time I feel too happy to be quiet.”

“Pray, do be still,” said Ursula; “there’s Doctor Perry over yonder. I declare I’ll call to him and ask him to prescribe for you if you are so outrageous.”

Eleven o’clock had been fixed on for the marriage, in

order that the dinner for the happy couples and their immediate friends might not be postponed beyond the usual time. After dinner, the change from work to play was such a novelty, that all eyes brightened with the enjoyment of the holiday, while the bells rang out, merrily pealing afresh with every half hour to celebrate the day. Soon after dinner the neighbours came in twos and threes to share the ample tea provided for them, and to join with the relatives of the two wedded pairs in distributing their good wishes and congratulations. After tea, the enormous kitchen was made ready for a round game at 'twirl the trencher,' and the brides and bridegrooms, minister and laymen, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters, all joined in the sport. The old walls rang with laughter as 'twilight' now and then gave the advantage to the young and active, unseating some stout old lady or stiff yeoman, and making them, whether they would or not, young again. This, and two or three comic songs in the intervals of sprightly chat and conversation, made up the evening's amusement. But comic songs *were* comic songs in those days : people did not go to hear a fresh one every week and then go away to lose it in a whirl of business. One comic song in a general way was as much as one comic country amateur cared to carry about with him. When a wedding or a christening called him, perhaps once in every few years, from his retreat, his song was sure to find a welcome.

The much-respected eight-day clock, with its pendulum and ponderous weights modestly encased in

five feet of polished oak, standing stiff and upright like a stern sentinel, struck seven. Then a huge round of beef, some well fatted geese and poultry, and an abundance of other good things, were served for supper. Soon after this was finished, an uneasy move or two was made as if for parting. The young folks pressed hard for another hour; but the more experienced were inflexible. If they could anyhow have come to an amicable arrangement with the *animals* about the wedding, it is doubtful whether they would not have been led into the same weakness that the citizen falls into on such occasions. But the sheep must be seen to before daybreak. The cocks would crow under the windows at the first opening of the morning. The cows would low piteously if they were not milked in time. Then there was a beech patch to be stubbled; a hedge to be mended; a field to be ploughed; some oat cakes to be stirred and grilled; some chickens that would die, poor things; some butter to churn; some cheese to make; a house that would be all up side down if its keeper should sleep an hour too late in the morning. So after innumerable good nights, and many a fervent "God bless thee, my lass," and many a "Long life and a happy one to thee, my lad," accompanied with correspondingly hearty shaking of hands, the day was brought to a close at ten o'clock.





## PART SECOND.







## CHAPTER XI.

### CHANGES.

Is not our sofa softer when one end  
Sinks to the welcome pressure of a friend ?

LANDOR.

**T**HOUGH Grayworth itself was little altered after the space of twenty years, the people had all changed. One Jabal ceased to rear the cattle: he bowed and fell, and his friends laid him in the earth, where the empty shell that had contained the soul lost gradually the form it had borne through life as its memory in the survivor lost its distinctness through the multitudinous objects passing before the eyes in crowds, eventually shutting out the dead, or leaving only its shadow. Another, from weakness, ceased to till the ground, and the stronger fed him with its produce, and woman so trimmed the flickering lamp of his feeble life that it burned on to the last in cheerfulness: then the charred wick was laid sacredly aside by loving hands, in sure and certain hope that it would be rekindled with an everlasting flame. Another, who had spent his substance early in life in revelling, buying no oil for a dark night, went to trim his lamp when the light of others failed him, found that it

would not burn, and, like the foolish virgins, was shut out in darkness. Another, famous for his senility, said one evening that he felt cold, gathered the clothes around him, and "fell asleep." In the morning, when the little one tapped at his door, as usual, and said, "Grandfather," no "Come in, love," was heard. Softly the child stole on tip-toe to the bed-side to awaken him gently: at sight of the pale ghastly face, so like his, yet so strangely unlike, the little one was seized with fear, as, for the first time in her life she learned the bitter name of the inevitable! As one by one had fallen from the front ranks, others had come up from the rear, ready to fill up the broken line. Children had grown to be men and women, very like their parents, even to the remotest ancestry—barring their garments—and a new generation of little strangers, who had put in a vigorous claim to their rights, were really in possession of the land, notwithstanding to the contrary, according to the title deeds in existence. Young Possession laughed and danced, while old Proprietor sat poring over his parchments.

Twenty times the tender corn had thrust the young blade up from the yielding earth, flowered, ripened, waved in golden gladness for the heart of man. As many times the land of autumn, rifled of its riches, had lain bare, waiting in poverty and silence to be purified by the pinching frosts and winter winds, till Nature, rested and renewed, came forth again as many times, robed, and ready for her mission. Still the old earth was much about the same: the sylvan scenery had

scarcely changed : foliage as fresh and green as ever, fluttered in the breeze, and rocked, as it seemed, the same birds that had sung there twenty years before. The same old trees were where they stood when Abel Armstrong climbed them as a boy. The boughs that had formed his seat then tempted his eyes upwards now as he passed, musing often in melancholy mood over relentless fate. His pretty wife declined and died soon after their marriage. Abel, when he was made to follow her to the grave, could scarcely believe his senses. He was staggered by the shock as much as if he had not seen her slipping away from him. But *time*, the gift which Providence bestows alike on "the just and the unjust," came to his aid and slowly healed his wound, though the scar was for a long while visible. He gradually awoke from his stupor to a reverie, and took to walking something after his former fashion ; then glided from a life of great activity to an easy, tranquil course, undisturbed by any other ambition than that of being a staunch friend and a useful neighbour. He enjoyed thenceforth through a long life the respect he had won by his early energies and maintained by his moral standard. His habits were generally temperate, his morals always unimpeachable. Besides being regarded as chief and head among the farmers all around, who often consulted him on matters of business, he was frequently appealed to upon little matters of dispute among the neighbours ; who oftener preferred to be guided by his judgment and to take his advice in exchange for

amicableness rather than have their disputes taken before the magistrates—by whom, as well as by the clergymen around, Abel was regarded as an absolute blessing in the place ; not less for the sake of his own exemplary character than for his natural faculty for maintaining peace in the neighbourhood.

Ursula, twenty years a wife, is somewhat broader and stouter and ruddier than on her wedding-day. She bears her forty years with a becoming grace, managing well her house, her children, and in point of fact, managing most other things ; for Mr. Brown is grown so portly and takes things 'so easy' that his wife is forced to sue for an anchorage now and again. Mr. Brown would readily give place and leave *her* captain of the ship ; for often as his wife sits at the helm, her scrutinizing eyes descries rocks in the distance, and the signs of quicksands which to him appear to be all smooth water. But Ursula insists that, though she is willing to be his adviser, she never will give orders.

The same doctor still inhabits the same house,—the one his father left him, scarcely a stone's throw from the village. Everybody knows it, with its respectable stretch of railing in front of a half circle of ground, a sort of shrubbery, not now very ornamental, it being nothing more than a dusky half-sphere of grass and leaves and earth, with a few stems of birch and larch, and other dwindling trees jostling together, or struggling by each other for light and air. This is relieved, however, by the carriage way, a broad smooth

band of gravelled ground, sweeping round from either gate with a gentle rise to the wide flight of stone steps projecting from the door midway. Everybody knows the doctor's large dark-green door, with its huge lion-face knocker: its stone hall has but a cheerless aspect: the long passage leading thence to the surgery echoes one's footsteps as if to make the most of the small number of feet that parade it: the doors sound twice, to say the least, when violently shut; in short, isolation resounds all over the old place, and tells more strikingly to the stranger than words can tell, that it is a large house unenlivened by the voices of women and children.

The doctor had made an early acquaintance with the two young families soon after their marriages. Not only had he become acquainted with one of them in consequence of his hopeless task in Abel's wife's case; but also with the other couple, from another, happier cause: the joyous William Brown solicited his attendance a year after his Ursula has taken his name and his abode. The doctor, who proved himself to be kind and considerate too, had a happy knack of making himself at home. Thus a certain understanding was soon established between him and the Browns, at whose house he became a frequent visitor, familiarising himself with all their little troubles, not disdaining when he had time to go and take a friendly evening pipe with Mr. Brown. He often laughed at Mrs. Brown caressing her baby, telling her that it was nothing but a great warm dumpling. One day, how-

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ever, when it was about eight weeks old, he happened to go in when the dumpling was in trouble. The evidence of its affliction was no mere puling whimper, but an out-and-out cry—a loud, painful, helpless wail, such as makes the strongest shudder with anxiety to help it. “Why, whatever can be the matter?” said the doctor, as the young mother in a state of great excitement, with tears rolling down her own cheeks, was endeavouring with all her might to pacify the child, turning it and patting it in all manner of ways. “What have you been doing, Mrs. Brown? You must have stuck a pin in the poor thing.”

“Oh! no, doctor; I’ve felt all over the poor little dear to find that out, but it’s nothing of that sort. Whatever shall I do?”

“Take its dress off,” said the doctor.

Mrs. Brown obeyed.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, what fools women are,” he said in a tone of despair, as she proceeded to divest the child of some two or three yards of swathing. “There’s the pin, right in the poor little creature’s back,” he said, taking up the sharp offender and exposing a tiny crimson speck in the delicate skin surrounded by a few inches of mottled flesh quivering under the smart. He kicked the swathe from about his legs and feet: “Put that thing in the fire,” he said impatiently, “and get a warm piece of soft flannel, and wrap round the child and make it comfortable, *do*.”

From that time the doctor never failed to take an

interest in the little one ; he watched its growth, and spoke to it now and then as it fixed its large blue eyes upon him while he sat talking or laughing with its mother or father. Heretofore he had always concluded in his own mind that all babies were much about the same ; and—like Captain Sutter and his friends, at California, who walked auriferous ground without suspecting the existence of the precious metal underneath their feet—the doctor found a treasure deeper than the chubby cheeks of the little child as soon as he took the pains to look for it. It grew up in familiar knowledge of him ; he felt bound to let it twine about his heart, as he said, though he professed to scorn the weakness of attaching himself very closely to any earthly thing. As she grew older, he would romp about with the little Mary Anna, raise her with a jump as high as he could reach : she would spring up half a dozen times, then scream with laughter and cry out, “Now anoder ; gain, Docker.” “No !” he would say, drawing out an orange from his pocket and rolling it along the ground, “you sly little puss, I’ve brought you a golden ball ; there ! run along and play with it ;” then turning to the mother, “I declare, Mrs. Brown, I never will constitute myself a mere stump for that pretty little jessamine of yours to climb about, so I tell you frankly.”

“Well, doctor,” Mrs. Brown would say, laughing, “I can’t help the child taking to you ; her little tongue wags as fast about you as it does about me or her father, I can assure you.”



"Well, but you are her mother ! and you mustn't let her talk so much about me. There, put her little hood on. She'll take cold out there if you don't mind."

He would often pass the door on horseback, musing like a philosopher if this child were nowhere about ; but as sure as he caught sight of her flaxen curls he would jump down and feel in his pockets, only to find a disappointment greater than the child's if there happened to be nothing for her. A kiss and a promise in that case would take him there the next idle hour he could find to fulfil the promise.

After a time another little Brown presented itself to the world, and another ; and then another, when the little Mary Anna was twenty years of age.

The same curate, too, lived and worked all these years in the same place, leading a contented, if not actually a happy life, respected by the people, honoured and beloved by the rector, esteemed and admired by Doctor Perry, who occasionally spent an evening with him at home, and as often persisted in carrying him off to one or other of the quieter of his own friends elsewhere.

Mr. Benson, though in receipt of but little money, never considered himself in the least degree poor. Being one of those faithful novices who find a never-ceasing charm in the pleasures of study, he had seen with rapture the whole range of the world's sciences lying before him all unexplored. In the first enthusiasm of his young life at Grayworth, with a prodigious propensity to search into the mysteries of

the universe, he believed he should yet be able to grasp everything. "I find Nature," he wrote to a confidential friend at that time, "I find Nature to be a priceless volume, containing immutable precepts of wisdom, happiness, joy—never failing in consolation, and, when needed, medicine. In her free temple the mind grows clear—clear enough to discern and stand in awe of its own magnitude. The heart expands—opens itself wide enough to envelop the whole range of all created things; and one's whole being bows in gratitude to God for the glad day on which it was conceived. Here Beauty and Love are linked with wealth—wealth that disdains to be bound by care-forged fetters, even though they be of gold or silver, and brightly though they glitter; still they are chains, those servile habits of the mere ambitious, from whom the wealth of which I speak *flies*, and only settles when the human heart holds communion with its Maker—not alone in temples, in green fields, in the country, but in solitude—the solitude of a city, it may be, and that is solitude indeed. Everywhere where man finds it convenient to withdraw himself from that which goes by the name of society to seek true freedom, *there* will the wealth of which I speak be sure to follow him, and bring no care nor sorrow.

"Here, at least, I can interest myself in my spare hours in the rich mines of literature, and revel at will in the luxuriant delights of pioneering through vast virgin tracks of knowledge. I believe that with all these refreshing auxiliaries I shall yet be able to cheat the grave for many years."

And so it proved, in spite of the predictions of the doctors. After twenty years had come and gone, the curate's enthusiasm, though much cooled down, was not quite quenched. His face was so much like the face of twenty years before, that people who had known him then assevered that he had only altered for the better.

All these years he had lived in private lodgings, with something of the feeling of a bird of migration; that it was not worth while to settle down, as he was likely to be off one of these fine mornings. But now, at last, he began to look out for a house, where he might feel at home and be more independent.

The only residence in the neighbourhood likely to be suitable for him, belonged to the rector: it was about to be vacated. Unfortunately for him it was a marked exception to the general rule in point of tidiness. When he first took it the garden was in a deplorable condition, flaunting its many-coloured weeds as if in derision of the humbler herbs that grew in the field close by. In accordance with the precocious nature of weeds, those on the curate's ground had rapidly ripened and shed their seeds till the third and fourth generation, all unmolested, had germinated, and despoiled the ground of its richness. Every part was in a ruinous state, excepting two patches of ground—one each side the front door contiguous to the road—where were oblong flower-beds, now covered with daisies. Though these were of a nature too humble to be gaudy, they did not please the curate. Their monotony, the grave-like

shape of the beds, the lowly flowers themselves, fresh though they were, and much as he liked them, mingled too much of melancholy with his memory of the sadness he had experienced in parting with several of his best friends. "Daisies are very nice in their place," he said, smiling sadly, "but, humble as they are, they need keeping under control: this is too much of a good thing." So, like the weeds, the daisies were uprooted, and the whole place presented a woe-begone appearance. Even the outside walls of the house were bare, excepting indeed the unsightly remains of some withered trees, whose dead stems and branches now presented a weird appearance, like ghosts of things that *had* been. A few ragged remnants of the dried old leaves hustled together here and there ready to crumble into dust at the touch or at the first gust of wind: clinging drearily to the crucified skeleton-branches, they forcibly reminded one of the cross-grained creeping sensation one's nerves used to be subject to by the hideous sight of a wretched malefactor upon a gibbet-post here and there on the high road, judicially set up by our forefathers.

This dearth came of neglecting to water what *had* been the rose trees and other climbing plants covering the front of the house with flowers. So long as they grew unaided, the parsimonious old lady who occupied the house allowed them to grow on without molestation. But the plants had the misfortune of being young at the time she became Mr. Ross's tenant, and being situated at a southern aspect, were liable to suffer

without a friendly hand to aid them with a little water in the dry season. Having none, they struggled for a time, like many other neglected things, then died.

The old lady had grown sour from much perturbation of mind, increased by her having exhausted a considerable portion of her little competency in the lottery. When the rector, in company with the curate, was inspecting the premises, he gently expostulated with her about the loss of the trees; but he got an answer of such high-pressure speed, that he preferred to abide by the little loss rather than stand the chance of having to encounter another attack from her. Besides, his natural disposition ever led him to practice leniency. He was in the habit of saying that "it was not well to be too hard with a poor widow." He must have been hard indeed to have made much impression upon this one. Her answer to his gentle remonstrance was a storm of words that ended in crying. "I should like to know," she said, assuming a threatening attitude, "I should like to know what *I've* got to do wi' waterin' th' trees in scorchin' hot weather like this; enough to melt anybody, it is. Who dun yo' think is goin' to carry th' watter? Not me, I can tell you; not if you was as tall as th' house top, I wouldn't do it, sir. Besides, they're not *my* trees; I never set 'em nor never wanted 'em, such a lot o' rubbish as they are. Nobody can eat roses, and nobody 'll buy 'em about here, and I've got quite enough to do wi'out waterin' other folk's trees just o' purpose for other folks to look at as cares nowt about me nor aught as belongs to me. You may

call yourself a gentleman if you like, Mr. Ross ; but I know you wouldn't have dared to cum and abuse me i' this fashion if my poor deceased husband as is dead and gone had been alive now. You ought to be ashamed to mention such a thing to a poor lone woman like me ; but everybody's alike now I'm an unprotected widow—I suppose I'm always to be trampled upon." She put her apron to her eyes, and sat down quite overcome with her emotions.

The rector saw that it was vain to try and put the case to his tenant in a simple, common-sense light, as, the moment he essayed to reply, her strength returned again. She would listen to nothing but her own voice, and her volubility knew no bounds. In truth, she was labouring under the illusion that the world had patted and petted her in her time of prosperity, while yet she had a husband and was pretty well-to-do in the world, and that now the same world turned the cold shoulder on her because she was poor and unaided. Whereas, the world, going on in its accustomed way, just the same as ever, was, as a matter of course, always pleased to see her as an acceptable and amiable friend or a good customer, and welcomed or thanked her accordingly. Now that she was jealous and suspicious of her acquaintances, disobliging and morose in her temper, the world naturally wished to have as little as possible to do with her, to get what was due from her, and bid her good-bye. She blamed it because it did not choose to go out of its way to make new social laws for her special benefit, which, were it possible, could never

have been obeyed. She abused everybody. The world at large she called sordid and selfish—though she never boasted a sunbeam of poetry—till by continually chafing herself against so large and hard a substance, which was insensible of her attacks, she increased her own irritability until her presence was almost unbearable.

So the good rector turned to the curate and told him, in Latin, that as it would be unbecoming in him to fight with the weapon used by the adversary before them, and it being evident that no other form of defence would be accepted by her, he thought it would be better to *run* than to stand any longer to be fired at from such a battery. A truce was made, however. After giving orders as to where the keys of the premises should be left, the rector and Mr. Benson, the curate, departed in peace, without a sigh of regret at their final separation from the wayward widow.





## CHAPTER XII.

### DOCTOR PERRY AND HIS PATIENT.

Intelligence and courtesy not always are combined :  
Often in a wooden house a golden room we find.

LONGFELLOW'S LOGAN.

TO set up housekeeping for himself was a privilege the curate had long wished to enjoy: The landlady at his lodgings not seeing things exactly in the same light as he saw them, had often complained, though in a low tone, about his increasing collection of minerals and insects, as being the cause of additional accumulation of dust. Being a remarkably clean woman, Mrs. Laneson disapproved of any arrangement which interfered with her constant habit of making things tidy about her. Her complaints were generally made in a respectful manner, however, until one morning "before rain," when her worst corn had been trodden upon, she could bear the state of things no longer, and went in some heat to seek the curate. After tapping at his door, she entered, and, with a face flushed by the pain of her foot, and warmed by the weather as well as by a little temper, she commenced her attack without preface. "I have come, Mr. Benson," she said, "on purpose to ask you if I cannot



have your study cleaned out, for I'm quite ashamed of it! It's all o' such a litter it looks like a pig-stye. If you'd just let me put all them papers on the fire it strikes me you'd be all the better for the loss of 'em. And them ugly stones as nobody can ever make anything out of—they're not half so pretty as lots of Derbyshire spar as I've seen some of our folks keep fodderin' up on their shelves as are good for nothing, *I'm* sure, but to make things for the garden; and that's where they ought to be, and yours along wi' 'em:—a littering the place up as they do, and no good to anybody in a room that one lives in. And as to caterpillars and beetles! they're nothing but a pest at best o' times. It 'ud be the best thing you could do to let me clear all the lot of 'em out, and then, most likely, according to my way of thinking, you wouldno' carry such a white face as you do; and you'd seem a little more satisfied with the dinners I cook for you,—as are cooked well enough, if I know what's what, for the first gentleman in the land,—that are sent back again time after time as if they wasn't worth eating, except about as much as would keep a kitten alive. I think I know what a good dinner is, and what a gentleman ought to do wi' it when he gets it! I've no patience wi' it, when it's all the fault o' them as ought to try and eat. But it's no use talking about it while so many o' these things take away your appetite; I don't like it at all, I can tell you, sir."

Having given the curate this piece of her mind, Mrs. Laneson was about to turn away without receiving

an answer ; but Mr. Benson requested her to stay for his reply. The room she had referred to was the curate's study, his laboratory, and his general repository. Besides his books, all the fruits of his intellectual pleasures were preserved in that room. There were the collections of his botanical wanderings for years ; different apparatus for chemical and pneumatical experiments ; stuffed skins of birds and their dried skeletons were side by side ; numerous specimens of geology, cases of butterflies, moths, and other winged insects, some recent specimens of which were usually to be seen there in the summer time fixed in various parts of the room by means of entomological pins. Dried skeletons of giant leaves and fronds upon cartridge paper were tacked about the walls, besides a number of other curious objects of every description which an active-minded bachelor is supposed to be in love with. The curate regarded these as the children of his tender indulgences. Apart from his congregation, saving his dog, his bird, and flowers, all his earthly affections were placed upon this collection of oddities—which his landlady regarded as a heterogeneous compilation of worthless encumbrances. The maid-servant was never allowed to enter this room : and when good Mrs. Laneson herself went into it with the firing and other necessaries, she only trod a certain prescribed path which the curate made her promise never to deviate from. But whenever he saw her there, the thread of his thought would be sure to snap. He could not refrain from glancing suspiciously that

way, and trembling for his specimens while regarding the large circumference of this good woman, who at twenty-one was called a bouncing girl, and had been steadily increasing in rotundity during twenty-five years from that time. Now the bare thought of such a person walking in for the purpose of cleaning his study out filled him with dismay, and confirmed him in his previous half-resolve to leave her rooms for more convenient accommodation, and guard his treasures from molestation by sacrilegious hands, the dread of which oppressed him continually.

"Well, Mrs. Laneson," he said, in answer to her attack about the dust in his room and his want of appetite, "as the kind of life I lead here does not seem agreeable to you, we shall do well by taking the advice that Abraham gave to Lot, and *part* as friends, rather than remain in company with each other in any sort of contention. I am sorry to have been a source of provocation to you, but it shall not be so much longer, as I wish to inform you that it is my intention to leave here this day month. I have felt for some time past that I should do better in housekeeping; but hope that will not prevent us from being good friends: we are all verging towards the same end, you know, though our paths may vary; but if each of us earnestly strives for the straight one, no doubt it will all come right at last."

Mrs. Laneson, deeply penitent for what she had said, begged that the curate would pardon her if she had given him offence.

He gave her to understand that he could not alter his

mind ; speaking, however, with much consideration, he soothed her with the assurance that he was not offended, and though quite determined upon leaving her, that it was on account of his real necessity of having a house to himself.

Doctor Perry, upon learning of his friend's prospects of housekeeping, advised that he should henceforth spend less time in his study, and take the double benefit of fresh air and exercise at the same time by using his garden as his recreation-ground for the good of his health.

Though the curate had a decidedly philosophic turn of mind, that led him into the habit of thinking about almost every other subject, his thoughts seldom seemed to turn in the direction of the management of his own body ; his health he left entirely in the hands of his doctor ; he took *his* medicine, passively obeyed his orders in regard to it, and reckoned then that he had accomplished his duty in the matter. No sooner was he installed in his new domicile, with a garden of his own, than he believed, from what the doctor had said, that the opportunity presented itself for him to become, by means of his own activity, strong and hearty in a very short time. With this end in view, he set himself at once to work like a regular labourer. Being much fatigued after the first six hours, he turned from sheer exhaustion into his study ; but found himself too tired either to write or read. On the next day, in spite of his determination to go and dig again to work off the stiffness, he felt his limbs growing painful, and at night

was so wearily worn that he was glad to fling himself on his bed without undressing, and so slept till morning, like a child forgetting the sorrows of the rod. On the following day, however, he still persevered, and worked on till the fourth day, when his appetite failed him, his head grew giddy, and his stiffened limbs refused to obey his stubborn will. Turning sick and faint, he was at last forced to give up and send for the doctor, who at once informed him that he had brought upon himself a general disorder of the system through excessive exertion.

Some physiologists tell us that the motive power of all the voluntary organs has its centre in the cerebellum. If so, it may be inferred that Doctor Perry's capability for action was considerable; as that organ, in proportion to the rest of his brain, was amply developed. By his large circle of acquaintances he was claimed to be a man of parts: by which was understood that he was philosophic with the philosopher, with the student studious, and could readily take to luxury with the epicure. With a broad brow and a sanguine-lymphatic temperament, he was keen and shrewdly observant: being equally fond of study and amusements, he took to both with an equal degree of ardour; each seemed to a certain degree to be necessary with him to keep up 'the balance of power.' His vigorous intellect was based upon a solid foundation of animality. With good natural abilities, in addition to the advantages of a liberal education, he *realised* rather than obtained a large connection and a competent

income from his deceased father's profession and popularity. He was inclined to be expensive in his habits; but his ambition for extra remuneration, which could only be secured by means of extra exertion in his profession, was generally counterpoised by his love of pleasure. In his tastes he was pagan. But he respected the Church, which he attended pretty regularly, and paid all due deference to it by the suppression of a few of his roughest forms of expression in conversation while in the presence of 'the cloth.' Now, however, that the curate was stripped of this, and stretched helpless, like any ordinary sinner, on a sick bed, he seemed to lose his sacerdotal dignity with the doctor, though he retained, perhaps firmer than ever, his friendly sympathy.

After the first paroxysm of the disorder had somewhat subsided in the patient, the doctor rated him soundly for his imprudence. He was not over punctilious now in choosing dainty words; not scrupling to use such as at other times he considered unfitting a parson's presence; but attacked him with volley after volley of severely sententious phrases of such a rugged nature as would scarcely be admissible now-a-days even from a worldly doctor to a wayward patient. "It is not the *poor* wretches," he said, "who might be *excused* for their ignorance, who bring on so much trouble and disgrace to the profession; but fellows who are crammed so full of learning that they have no room left in their craniums for common sense! It is such as *you* who are so blunder-headed that if one *gives* you good advice

you only *profess* to follow it by rushing madly into all manner of extremes. I *swear*, Benson," he said, raising his voice to a high pitch, "that if you *die* now through your own folly, I'll have 'FOOL' inscribed upon your gravestone."

But he knew well that the curate was not likely to die just then. He lay and listened to the doctor's ebullitions of wrath until he had exhausted about all the patience he was master of at the moment; and finding the storm by no means sedative to his feelings, he summoned his courage to command what little strength he had left, in the endeavour to rid himself of the doctor's presence. "Will you do me the favour, Doctor Perry," he interrupted, "to hear what I have to say? Feeling ill, I sent for you to help me to get better. If you have no desire to do so, I beg you will leave me now, and come and finish what more you have to say at a more convenient time. Had this ungentlemanly attack been made by an enemy, and with any reason for it, I could have borne it; but from you, doctor, without any right to blame me, it is unkind and unjust! I do not understand the meaning of it. There certainly must be some misunderstanding somewhere; but I beg you will defer any explanation till another time, when I will convince you that what I did I believed to be my duty. I shall be glad if you will leave me at once, and come and see me when I am better."

But Doctor Perry was not to be put down so easily. He had taken upon himself the privilege of a friend in

scolding ;. and seeming to assume that the warmth of his friendship increased in proportion to the increasing heat of his temper, he lashed away with his rod of affection till the love in it had either burnt itself out, or made the patient too warm to discover it. But on seeing that the curate was hurt and offended, the doctor was soon brought to a sense of his own impropriety. Quickly relenting, he begged to be excused, on the plea that friendship called upon him not to mince the matter. Indeed, upon seeing his friend relieved from the severity of the attack, all the doctor's better nature returned upon him. He had been much put out, he said, and further excused himself by asserting, in very mild tones however, that such glaring inconsistency on the part of the curate was enough to make a *saint* swear.

Notwithstanding that the doctor was a man who sometimes sinned, and as often suffered, he never showed the least sign of patience with any malady whatsoever in others that was self-wrought. So provoked was he now with the curate for overworking himself, that he was impelled to walk about the room for some minutes to work off his own irritation. At length, however, when the crisis was past, and he saw that the patient was in a fair way of recovery, his own paroxysm of passion being over, he forgave his friend for his illness, as his friend forgave him for his temper. In repeating his visits during the following few days, he laughed, and scolded, and condoled with his patient alternately ; then laughed and scolded at the same



time, and at last rallied him about the sermons he had given them on patience when he was comfortably at ease and without pain in his pulpit. "Now remember, Benson," he said, "I shall only allow you one more bottle of medicine ; and then you'll have to depend upon that favourite prescription of yours, patience, for the rest of the recovery ; and mind that for ever afterwards you observe the *via media*."

The curate being no stranger to the practice recommended to him, was far more likely to act upon it than he who gave the advice. When he arrived at that point of convalescence when patience alone could best complete his cure, he soon found himself as well as usual again. He resumed his exercise in the garden, but with less ardour and more judgment, and reaped from moderation that enjoyment which it never fails to yield its votaries, as well as that addition of bodily strength which the doctor had predicted for him when he advised him to pay a little personal attention to his garden for the sake of his health.





## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE CURATE'S BIRTHDAY.

Hope not sunshine every hour,  
Fear not clouds will always lour ;  
Ambition is a meteor gleam ;  
Fame an idle restless dream ;  
Round Peace the tenderest flower of spring !  
For the future be prepared,  
Guard whatever thou canst guard ;  
But, thy utmost duty done,  
Welcome what thou canst not shun.

BURNS.

**I**T was the dreariest, darkest day of a blustering, cold, north-easterly May. Nature *should* have put on fresh robe of new green, but she still wore her old winter grey. The sun scarcely pierced through the low, drifting clouds ; cold winds kept the cuckoo away ; and, in spite of the poets tuning their harps, neither milkmaids nor flowers could be gay. The ungallant easterly winds hurled influenza at the maidens who were obliged to come out, and blighted the beauty of those flowers that had been kissed into blossom by the flattering sunshine of the transient hour. The curate of Grayworth was by this time no longer a young man. Nor did he appear so : yet the shade on his face was due

to meditation, perhaps, more than to the hand of time. Most men in whom thought and feeling are deep and strong—like stalwart buildings—look somewhat grim when overcast by the shadow of their own strength. In his moments of sadness, the curate appeared severe from the breadth and depth of his brow, which formed, however, a very suitable setting for a pair of lustrous dark eyes, peculiarly expressive of benignity, even when engaged in his ordinary duties, especially so when in conversation. There was none of the evanescent changeableness about his countenance frequently noticeable on younger faces, neither was there any trace of that envy-canker which so often apes the lines of honest care on the features of some men of his own age. A disposition of determined endurance, and the habit of examining and battling with his own faults had deepened the intensity of his eyes, though it had somewhat subdued their sparkling vivacity, and left on his face a singular aspect of quiet thoughtfulness mingled with a fierce kind of active contentment, or savage serenity; which, on his naturally open countenance, in his moments of relaxation from thoughtful duty, might have been mistaken by strangers for light-hearted gaiety.

He occasionally betrayed a slight abruptness of manner, though commonly in possession of a certain repose, which, with his social qualifications, set one at ease in his presence; and made one feel that he was a pleasant and desirable companion, of good spirits and a kindly heart. Indeed, most of his sighs were for the sorrows

of others: where affliction was, there was he sure to be found, though he sometimes rejoiced in merry-making with his friends when Fortune smiled. His natural sociability ever won for him a hearty welcome from those who had the good fortune to be in health and prosperity, as did his gentle kindness from the sick and suffering. He had spent the greater part of the present day in reviewing the field of his past experience: and the result of his cogitations was a condemnation of himself for his shortcomings and misdemeanors. He could not shake off a certain dulness that had been upon him all the day, excepting for a short time while preparing for his customary Wednesday evening sermon, for which he had chosen the text, "It is good for a man to wait and quietly hope." Mr. Benson never relied on his memory for his delivery, though he often spoke extempore. Had he forgotten an idea that might have been applicable to the well-being of his hearers, regret would have weighed down his sensitive spirits and disturbed his peace of mind. He wrote the whole of his sermons and read them over and over again before preaching them. While writing them he would fancy himself in the pulpit, throwing with all his energy his wide, deep love into the hearts of the people. His face, on such occasions, lit up and warmed by congenial occupation, shone with a strange brightness of its own. Once plunged into the midst of his work on the present evening, he forgot himself and his own vexations till, having reached the end of the sermon under consideration, he mechanically took

out his watch, then yawned, as he remembered, not with satisfaction, that it was the eve of his birthday.

• This circumstance, together with the enjoinder of the text, to which he felt scarcely able on this particular day to do justice, combined to invest him with an uncommon degree of seriousness. He finished his last sentence, closed the manuscript, and put it in his pocket with a sharp, sudden air of abstraction, from which it might have been supposed that he was returning to his pocket a dishonoured bill of exchange rather than a well-wrought elaboration of the injunction of the text; which he himself strove to obey to the letter; praying, while he wrote, that the words he should utter might be the means of helping to draw the little flock under his care closely and safely into the fold where the destroying wolf is kept at bay by the guardian Shepherd of purity. His manner in the pulpit on that evening was remarkably earnest. His congregation was composed principally of poor parishioners; a notable little group of whom, being at an advanced age, had turned their steps towards the church as a place of refuge from the storms of life. A goodly sprinkling too of young and middle-aged people were among the number, the greater portion of the villagers choosing to worship in public with the beloved curate for an hour or two during the week. As wealth, fashion, and position were extraneous from the subject, it needed none of these to make the sermon understood and appreciated. It had its blessing in the consolation it afforded to the faithful little flock

who heard it. In concluding his discourse, the curate held out little promise for the future happiness of those who are mere pleasure-seekers in the world. But for every one seeking to do good, endeavouring in the days of his strength to help the weaker of his own sex, girding himself to guard and guide the erring ones of the more confiding, frailer sex; for him who would stoop to throw aside a thorn from the path of a weary brother, or manfully dash from the outstretched hand of a weak sister the flower that tempts her by its insidious fragrance while it enfolds a serpent—for all such, he held forth, in the most convincing manner, the sure and certain hope of the double reward insured to the good and kind—that present inward peace which the world of itself can neither give nor take away, and the Eternal Heaven in future for every one who obeys the dictates of an enlightened conscience.

The preacher had scarcely closed behind him the little church door leading out from his vestry into the church-yard, when he was accosted with a petition from a little girl, who had been patiently waiting till service was over on purpose to see him. "Oh! Mr. Benson," she said with a low curtsy, "if you please, sir, grandfather's very bad, and he wants to know if you'll come and see him?"

"Indeed, Jenny!" said the curate; "yes, I will go at once; but I hope he is not so *very* ill."

"Yes, sir, he *is*. Granny says he's a-dying," said the child, thoughtfully; "but *I* think he looks better. I don't think anywhere hurts him now. The doctor

says he needn't have no more physic ; but Granny told me he was very bad ; and will you come directly this minute, she says, please sir ?”

“ Yes, Jenny,” said the curate, taking the child's hand, as if to indicate that she should lead the way, “ I will go with you now.”

“ Oh, will you, sir !” said the child, in grateful surprise. “ I thought you was a-going to have your supper first.”

“ Have you been waiting long for me ?” said the curate.

“ I think so, sir ; it seems ever so long. I thought you would never come out of church.”

“ Indeed, Jenny ! Then you have been waiting and hoping quietly.”

“ I wasn't very quiet, sir. I kept walking about and looking at the church door all the while, thinking you would never come, you was such a long while, sir.”

“ Well, I *did* come, you see, Jenny. If you had left your post, or lost sight of the church door, perhaps I should have gone another way, and you would not have found me until morning.”

“ Oh, dear, whatever would Granny have said to me ? and what would poor grandfather ha' done without you ? He *does* want to see you, now he's so badly. I'm sure I should have cried if I hadn't found you.”

“ Yes, my child,” said the curate as they continued to walk side by side, “ you have found what you waited and hoped for, and you are satisfied. If you had gone away and missed me you would have been unhappy

yourself, besides losing for others that which you were sent out to seek. It is very likely, Jenny," he added gently, "that when you grow older, you will have to wait much longer for what you want. Will you always remember that it will be sure to come at last if you wait patiently; or even if you wait your whole life-time in this world, you will be sure to find in the end what you will love and enjoy all through such a long, long period of time that no one can measure it. It has no end and no beginning. That is Eternity, Jenny. But we cannot enjoy it until we die."

"I don't want to die, sir; but I will try and wait as long as I can if I can't get things without waiting; only I like to have anything when I want it!"

"Ah, Jenny! our Heavenly Father knows that it is not good for us to have all our earthly desires fulfilled. The world would be in a strange state of confusion if only a few of us had just what we wanted for a short time." Here they reached the old man's door. The child having felt quite at home with the minister from the moment she felt her little hand in his, and heard the gentle and considerate tones of his familiar voice, drew him into the open door-way with a triumphant air, exclaiming, "Here's Mr. Benson, Granny! I could'nt help stopping so long: he's only just come out o' church."

The old woman expressed her gratitude, and led the way to the dying man. He had spent a long life of good-natured contentment, well pleased with the good things of the present, confiding with the trust of a



child in the blessings of the future. His simplicity, combined with a degree of shrewdness, taught him the disturbing influence of doubt upon the mind. Having early ignored the scepticism avowed by some of his more restless neighbours, Jacob had lived a moderate life of hope and peace. He was now ninety-three years old ; had been indisposed only two or three days. During that time he had suffered slightly from pain and numbness in the head and back. This morning the pain had ceased, and his intellect was clear again. The doctor advised him to keep up his spirits. "Take no more medicine," said he. "I hope we shall soon see you down stairs again."

"No, doctor," said the patient, "never, till I'm carried down." In the evening he expressed a surprising sensation of the utmost tranquillity of body and mind ; said that his time was "drawing nigh," and he wished particularly to see Mr. Benson.

When the curate arrived, there was nothing for him to do but to congratulate his fellow-Christian that he was entering upon his long-expected possessions with so little trouble.

"I wanted to see you to tell you how *happy* I am," said the old man, as the curate gently pressed his hand.

"Not happier than I am to see you in this peaceful condition," returned the minister. He felt that the power of holiness, emanating from the benign countenance before him, was taking possession of him, like an active agent of peace, to lay the unquiet spirit in his own breast. "You have had a long and happy life, Jacob," he said.

"I've had my share o' trouble," said the old man cheerfully; "but by the blessing of God I've had much joy and pleasure on the whole."

"Yes," said the curate tenderly, "from what I have heard, you remembered your Creator in the days of your youth. You honoured your father and mother, and, in accordance with the divine law of Heaven your days have been long in the land."

In perfect unison of spirit they poured out their hearts in prayer and praise for several hours. The curate took no heed of the flight of time until the gentle summons came for the old christian to depart. He had waited till the fulness of his time, when death dared not announce himself in the grisly form of a gaunt skeleton. Gentle as a welcome guide he came, to lead the mortal into unknown lands.

Notwithstanding that she knew his end was approaching, a shock of dismay struck the kind old woman with whom the dead man had journeyed through sixty years of his pilgrimage. She uttered a shriek of despair as the curate, who had been quietly awaiting the end, turned to inform her that the spirit had departed. Perhaps the message was premature; or did the spirit hover about the chamber for a while? Certain it is that all discernible traces of life were gone; the pulse had stopped; the breathing, to all appearances, had ceased, and a placid calmness—such as is never seen on mortal visage clogged by the cares of life—had settled on the dead man's face, and left it a model of profound peace. Some indefinable portion of

vitality vibrated to the woman's voice, or caught the sound intelligibly. The eyelids quivered visibly, then opened slowly, like rigid portals, with some difficulty, wider and wider, as the eyes sought—while the immovable stillness of death was on every other feature of the face—to ascertain whence proceeded the cry; they looked on the old woman steadily for a moment with a strange, unearthly gaze, then seeming to penetrate through her, far beyond to an unlimited distance, they glazed over, and closed again for ever. The silent countenance, slightly disquieted for a moment, settled down again into an expression as of eternal rest.

The curate, being unwilling to leave the bereft old widow to watch alone at the bed of death, found it was daybreak when he turned towards home to seek a little rest. Shivering in the frosty air of the morning as he met the labourers going to work after their wholesome sleep, he almost envied them the robust health that welcomed the wind as if it had been the dew on Zahara; while to him it was a cold garment that clung about him like a winding-sheet.

With restless faculties strangely at variance with his drowsy senses, he stretched himself on his bed and dozed in an unrefreshing slumber, till his house-keeper tapped at his door and announced, "Eight o'clock, sir." Benson's appetite was not improved by the vigils of the night. After an apology for a meal, he walked into the garden, as he used ordinarily to do before breakfast, to give a little air to some choice plants that he kept in a glass-covered frame. But

what was his vexation when he saw that the frame was already open, and that the plants, after having been copiously watered on the previous evening, had been exposed to the keen air of the night. His mind just then being wholly engrossed with thoughts of old Jacob Brownlow, he had forgotten to see that his frame was closed. A cutting hoar frost had hung the larger of the flowers in glittering crystals, as though it had mockingly bedizened them for the dance of death ; while the smaller plants, spangled in less degree, seemed to be waiting in attendance with the death-dews upon them.

Benson stood dumfounded ! struck by the magnificent blaze of beauty, which already began to dissolve in a burst of sunshine while he gazed at it, filled with self-reproach as real as if he had culpably seduced his flowers to destruction. In a little time the sun had melted the sparkling frost and decomposed the tissue of the plants : the flowers and leaves which yesterday were persistent with growing life, now suddenly drooped and flapped against the stems like the tattered shreds of a ravished banner.

Though a bachelor, Mr. Benson was as remote as possible in point of resemblance from those iron-hearted curmudgeons whose affections scarcely reach beyond the auriferous dust which they court and care for seemingly as if to live solely for their own enjoyment. Selfishness was by no means the foundation of Benson's state of life. He loved to hear the merry voices of children round about him, took pleasure in their ever-changing attitudes, saw beauty always in the flowing

hair and laughing eyes of the thoughtless, happy young, and believed that to keep and care for them made the manliness in a man feel strong. But fate having hitherto deprived him of these domestic blessings, he had nothing livelier of his own to love than his Skye terrier, his bullfinch, and his plants. These he nurtured, in lieu of other things, with extraordinary tenderness. The sight now of the sudden loss of his flowers was not calculated to improve his spirits, already low. Seeing, however, that there was no remedy for the disaster, he arrayed himself in solemn resignation and stood, like a man taking a final leave of his children, with folded arms, watching the dissolving ice, the plants blackening and drooping till the last leaf had lost all semblance of its former self. "Bury the dead out of my sight!" he said to his gardener, who had just come up to the spot and begun to bewail in contrite words the fate of the flowers which he could and should have saved.

"Bury what, Mr. Benson?" said a surprised voice issuing from the serpentine path. The voice was that of the rector; whose presence for once was unwelcome. The curate felt cross-grained and out of humour: his spirits had ebbed so low that he regarded every little annoyance as a calamity of fate: he was wretched.

"Mr. Ross!" he said with forced politeness as he turned towards his visitor, "Good morning to you, sir; I hope I see you well this morning?"

"Good morning to *you*," returned the rector, smiling as he detected that the cause of the cloud on his

curate's face was somewhere in the garden. "But may I ask what darkness has crossed your path that this bright morning has not the power to dispel. Where is the *dead* that *you* have to bury?"

The curate, in a mood of ill-disguised melancholy, pointed at the remains of his flowers and then explained to Mr. Ross that the death of old Jacob Brownlow had been the occasion of his neglect of them—how he was called away, the manner of the old man's decease, and how and why the plants had been allowed to die.

The rector was interested in the death, as he had been in the life, of old Jacob ; but he could not regard the loss of the plants in quite so solemn a light as that in which the curate persisted in painting it. "Ah," he said, "I see, I *see*, Mr. Benson ; you want a little greenhouse ; we must manage something better than this for you."

"This," said the curate, pointing to the frame, "is the second death-bed that I have witnessed since midnight."

"Not exactly so," said the rector. "You have seeds or slips from the plants. You can obtain the very same things again by propagation. With regard to old Jacob, the case is very different. We can never see him again as he was in the flesh. You know what Moschus said, lamenting Bion, 'the honey-voiced poet of Nature' :—

"Parsley and humble thyme, and the tender growth of  
the anise,  
These all live once more—they shoot up again in the  
spring-tide ;

M

But we, the mighty and strong—we men, the lords of wisdom—

When we have fallen and died, lie forgotten in earth's dark bosom."

"That, sir," said the curate, shaking his head, "is nothing more than a fanciful idea! My flowers are as really dead as old Jacob is. In fact, the life from him is now circulating on the earth in vitality of a far higher order than that of the parsley. The old man himself was only one of a number of branches sprung from *his* grandfather, and now his children and grandchildren are in being. Where would they have been had he died in infancy?"

"Query, of course," said Mr. Ross, as the two turned to walk round the garden. "I came, Mr. Benson, on this particular morning on purpose to congratulate you, and to wish you many happy returns of the day. The fourth, you said, was the anniversary of your birthday."

"Thank you, Mr. Ross; it is kind, indeed, of you to remember it so cordially."

"Not at all; it is only neighbourly," said the rector. "You were a little spring-bird—how many years ago?"

"Just forty."

"Forty! Is it possible? I shouldn't have thought it! I have seen you at times just lately look not over thirty, and should not at any time have taken you to be over thirty-five. But you have none of the cares of a family to trouble you."

"I have been looking forward long enough," said the curate, "to what I regard as the pleasures of a family. Of course I know that there is some little anxiety attending the position, but no earthly joy is quite free from alloy. Natural domestic pleasures yield much permanent comfort. Besides, it seems to me to be nobler for a man to take his share in bringing up the young world than to devote all his strength to himself alone. Every man has had his day of helplessness, and needed in his turn the guidance and protection of such as had previously left their own leading-strings. But it is getting late in the day with me now. I am beginning to give the matter up." The curate sighed quietly as he said this, either as if he thought there was yet a faint hope for him, or that he parted with the hope in regret.

"You are generally so quiet and reserved," said the rector, "that I did not take you for a marrying man."

"Well, you see," said the curate, in a meditative tone, "we *live again* in our children. I have been so busy with the prospect—which it appears after all I am not to realise—that I have not had time to be gay. It is folly in me to talk in this way; but a man cannot always hold and mould himself in his own hands as if he were a lump of glazier's putty. Brain and blood will out sometime in the course of one's life. I suppose it is human nature asserting itself over our pride. Doubtless the wisdom of the Creator orders it so; otherwise many of us, in our cynical sapience, would suppress so much of our own social and animal nature



that we should be left nothing better than drivelling weaklings by the time we had finished filtering ourselves according to our own ideas of purification. Our birthdays seem to constitute themselves prompters in these psychological revolutions: they are, as we have heard it said, like mile-posts on the journey through life: they arrest our attention and set us reflecting upon what we have seen and left behind us, and speculating on the probabilities of what we have yet to see of all that lies before us for the future. I can scarcely realise that I am forty years old, but it is a stern fact nevertheless; and this morning I feel like a bird that has been busying itself building all the spring-time, and after all finds no eggs in its nest."

"Well," said the rector, "it is an easy matter, you know, for a man to get married if he is determined upon it."

"Yes, but not so easy for him to find a wife whom he could really love and respect—as a companion for himself and a mother for his children."

"Perhaps you are too fastidious," said the rector.

"It is a matter," returned the curate, "about which I confess I am very particular. I certainly have never yet seen the girl I should like to take 'for better or for worse.' I could not endure an ill-favoured woman, nor one of mean or mediocre intellect."

Notwithstanding this innocent declaration, the high-minded curate had scores of times seen the woman whom he did take eventually "for better or for worse," he had known her and visited her parents from her

infancy. She was, moreover, though not ill-favoured, of decidedly mediocre intellect. But the question of love for such a girl was hitherto as foreign to his thoughts as palm trees were to Windsor Forest.

"It certainly is rather late in life to make such a confession," said the rector humorously.

"Granted," said the curate. "But all the difference between love at twenty and love at forty is, that at twenty it dances on tiptoe, and often trips, and at forty it walks in proper security. At twenty it is a naked sword, liable to cut at random! At forty it is a sword the same, but not without a safe sheath. It is always trenchant; but it has a polish which brightens and refines the greatest delights of life. True love is for ever young, rejuvenizing the soul wherever it enters. Still, I know the advantages of youthful years; and venture to believe that there are very few worthy and virtuous girls who would care to marry me now. I did not hurry about it when I was younger, from motives of prudence. Like many others, I never knew what a treasure youth was while I was in possession of it—till about ten years ago, when I awoke one morning and found that he had given me the slip. Then I learned for the first time how delicious was the life I had been revelling in, all heedless of the pleasurable companion I had lost, and ignorant of the joy he would steal from me at his departure. Before I had ever thought that time had anything to do with *me*, I was startled one morning by the sight of a white hair on my temple. Then middle

age gravely announced itself by a gradual sprinkling of them : they seemed to come and come with solemn dignity like monitors of mortality—to admonish me of the rectitude and reputation I should maintain ; while the dark hairs of my young days, still mingling with them, continually remind me of the purity of my childhood, and make me feel bitterly the contrast between contented innocence and restless riper years."

" *You restless!*" said the rector. "Come, come, this is going too far. Who upon earth is quiet and subdued if not you?"

"*Subdued,*" returned the curate, with something like a sneer of contempt ; "that is exactly what I would *not* be ! To be subdued is not to feel noble and free as I would wish to be ! Nevertheless, I am, as you say, *subdued* : the nature, the command, the dominion in me as a man is tamed, crushed : and where is my dignity ? I ought long before this time to have been at the head of a household, where all the faculties of my head and heart would have performed their proper functions, and so kept the brain and body in that better balance that would have driven out these fiendish fits of the blues—which I verily believe are spirits of imps that go about in search of empty hearts or idle heads, wherein they plunge headlong with sardonic grin, and play up their evil games to the miserable discomfiture of every poor wretch who happens to have the misfortune to keep an opening for them."

The good rector, willing to sympathise with his

curate, but being unable to understand the workings of his particular mind, did his best in his own way to set him right. Even could he have grasped Benson's whole thoughts and feelings, perhaps the business of bringing him to himself again would have been most effectually accomplished by the administration of a gentle castigation ; especially as the rector's prudence, as well as his profession and position, always won for him the curate's attentive ear, as well as his honest esteem. "It is unseemly, Mr. Benson," he said, "for a man of your profession, to give way to these fits of passionate despondency. You must gird yourself up, and go forth, armed with the staff of faith, to conquer the evil one who thus tempts you to ingratitude and irritability. Providence has greatly blest you with talents, and you must bear in mind that where much is given much will be required."

"I fear, sir," said the curate, as he uprooted a weed and looked at it for a moment, then hurled it to the ground, "I fear that any little talent I may possess is doomed to be buried in the earth—a course of procedure you know," and he smiled, "which our great Master himself disapproved. In that case I shall have become, corporeally, of less importance than dear old Moschus's parsley. I expect that I shall be hurried away to the dark portal some day, and shut out from the world without leaving behind me even the memories that live in one's posterity."

"Not so of necessity," said the rector. "In the common order of Providence you can marry if you are

so disposed. And there are others more suitable perhaps than girls, considering your time of life, from whom you might choose a wife. There is Mrs. Tomlin, for instance, and Mrs. Harris. It is possible, even probable, that neither of them would refuse an offer from you."

The ladies alluded to were young farmers' widows, whose unwearying interest in several eligible persons of the opposite sex divested them of that gentleness which most marrying men seem to regard as an indispensable requisite to their own peace and comfort; and which caused the several such gentlemen on closer acquaintance to leave the ladies to the more congenial company of a certain class of light hearts and consciences, whose only care was to avoid family responsibility and to amuse themselves in the passing present.

The old rector was ignorant of this; but the curate had heard it all, and much more, in his official visits, when his profession obliged him to listen to a number of persons of both sexes who were in the habit of diluting their religious experience with irrelevant gossip, and flavouring their gossip with a little scandal.

The curate shook his head as he thought over all this. "No," he said, "I eschew all widows, though I doubt not there are many excellent ones in the world. I want a kindly help who would be companionable to me in leisure moments, whose chief pleasure would consist in an undivided love to aid me in numerous little ways, and assist in providing me with necessary comforts, in return for the protection and care I am able and willing to devote to such an one."



## CHAPTER XIV.

### UNEXPECTED REVELATIONS.

Here is another victim. who is writhing under the merciless arrows of the universal torturer.

THACKERAY.

**T**HERE are in the world not a few men, gifted with superior mental power, whose legitimate course of action is altogether inadequate to the healthy use or natural force of that power. Doomed to a prescribed monotonous circle, such spirits will droop at one time or other, overweighted, if one may so say, with their own fulness. At these times, which fortunately are rare, even the trivial troubles of common occurrence will overcast the sufferer with a hue so sombre that everything about him appears dull as lead; in vain does he try by sheer force of will to shake off the weight that hangs about him, or to get relief without a crisis. Memory conjures up before him all the old vexations to which he has been previously subjected; all the old wounds of his heart get probed afresh through the involuntary sinking of his own mind; and his effort, however determined, to cure himself of his depression, falls powerless as the relaxed muscle of a

fainting arm, and nothing short of groans and tears will exhaust the fountain of his misery.

Once only had Mr. Benson betrayed himself in such a state of mental depression. It was six months previously to his taking Daisy Cottage. The rector happened unexpectedly to call upon him on the unpropitious morning, and to his surprise found him greatly excited. Benson begged to be excused from conversation on the plea of a headache. Being incapable of collecting his thoughts or even of *appearing* calm, he paced the room rapidly for a few moments, then, at the suggestion of the rector that he should bathe his head in cold water, he retired. Having shut himself up in his chamber, he proceeded to tear up some treasured manuscript sermons, which he dashed into the fire-place, apparently under the impression that he might counteract violence by violence. In the presence of the rector again, he found himself but little better for the energy thus expended. Still feeling incapable of conversation, he begged again to be excused, when he went into the next room, took up a chair and began to break it up, deliberately disjointing it at every socket. He was fiercely tugging to get the last two pieces asunder, when the rector, feeling a little apprehensive at hearing a noise so unusual as that which greeted his ear proceeding from his curate's private room, looked in unperceived, and was horrified at the expression of strange force depicted on the face of him who stood there. Mazeppa, reined in by Power, could not have looked more fiercely curbed than the usually quiet Mr.

Benson did at that moment during his eccentric occupation. His delicate nostrils palpitated visibly to his accelerated respiration. His dark eyes flashed an unwonted light. His thick hair, black as jet with the exception of an almost imperceptible sprinkling of silver threads, had left its high place, and now hung in heavy waves over his pale forehead, adding to the ghastly colour of his face; but his most tragical feelings seemed powerless to disturb the sweetness which even at this moment lingered about his mouth.

“Lunacy! God help us!” ejaculated the rector in a muffled tone, as he turned away thunderstruck at the state in which he beheld his curate. Alarmed for his own personal safety as well as for that of his friend, he hastened in terrified amazement to seek Doctor Perry. Returning with all possible speed in the course of a few minutes, the rector evinced considerable relief at finding the curate in his study, looking much more composed than when he left him. As an excuse for his absence, Mr. Ross feigned only to have been interesting himself in the garden. “Why, Mr. Benson, your beans are forwarder than mine, I see. However, I think I had better call again. My business is not particular: another time will do as well as the present: you seem quite unwell this morning, and would perhaps prefer to be alone.” He delayed his departure, nevertheless, till the doctor came, as if promiscuously as a friend, which was not an uncommon occurrence.

“Why! bless my heart! Benson,” said the doctor,



"what's the matter with you this morning? You look quite ill!"

Being thus caught in the chrysalis, as it were, with no means of escape, the curate felt compelled to make an open confession of his feelings. He declared, however, that it was a mere nothing, that he had experienced similar sensations once or twice before, and that it was only to avoid crying like a girl, that he had resorted to this extraordinary course of proceeding as a means of relief to his agitated nerves.

Like Job of old, and all other unfortunate souls who happen to get into trouble, Benson was tortured with lectures from his friends. The rector, attributing the malady to dyspepsia, advised that medicine should be given. The doctor differing from that opinion, declined giving it. "Throw physic to the dogs," he said hilariously, "and so follow the advice of one William Shakspeare; who of course did the same thing himself; and feeling the benefit of the prescription, handed it down to posterity." Turning to the curate, he said emphatically, "It is *rest, change, fresh air*, that you want, Benson; you have been *studying* too much by half! You know very well you have. You must bear in mind the proverb,—

Too much thought turns a young man grey.

Too much care turns an old man to clay.

And

Care to your coffin adds a nail no doubt;

While every laugh that's merry draws one out.

Take plenty of fresh air."

"And exercise much prayer," said the rector reverently.

"I should be glad of a little of your serenity, Mr. Ross," returned the curate, smiling; "I know I have been too anxious lately, and hurried myself overmuch about getting this translation into the press. But I must keep it in abeyance for a few days, and rest for the time, as our good doctor here advises."

"Aye, aye!" said the doctor, with an impatient gesture; "you always *do* when you are driven to it: you've been robbing your body of flesh to cram your cranium with pain. No wonder that the one is weak and the other weary. Well may your legs grumble at your head, that ought to know better. We look to a *fool* for folly, but we expect something approaching propriety from a parson! We get woefully deceived however. I, for one, shall know better for the future. When I am in search of prudence I shall go to a fool. I may find it there, and for folly I shall be sure to find it in an intelligent parson. Benson," he added, with a sharp look, half serious half comic; "I believe you are a genius—you are so egregiously deficient in common sense."

But for all this, it was Doctor Perry's fashion to declare to his acquaintances that Benson was the only sensible parson he had ever known, the only one whose company he could tolerate. All the brusque things he ever said to him were set down by the curate to honest friendship: offence was never given nor taken on either side without being cancelled before they parted. They understood each other.

It was a state very near akin to that just described that the curate found himself in on his present birthday. He had felt the horrors creeping about and gaining the ascendancy over him for some days previously. Had old Jacob Brownlow died in the day-time instead of the night, the probability is that even the change of emotions caused by the scene of his death-bed would have dispelled the gloom that was gathering on the mind of the curate, and wrought a beneficial change in him. But the circumstance was against him. Through inanition and loss of rest at that critical juncture of his health, he had overdrawn upon Nature without the wherewithal to pay when she rendered her account: for with all her lenient endurance, she has her time of limitation somewhere: the curate had overstepped the boundary; he had been treating himself by rigid study as if he had been one of those beams thrown across axles for boys to amuse themselves by balancing upon: he had burdened one end of the beam until it was overweighted; and the wise old conductress struck for more ballast rather than allow things to go on for a short time to the certainty of a premature dead stop.

A few days afterwards the curate was asked to pay a visit to Mrs. Brown, to administer a few words of consolation to her sick little boy of eight years old; whose oldest sister, Mary Anna, was still the favourite of Doctor Perry, and always treated by him as a child. This young lady had now the principal charge of the invalid, her mother having only a few days previously

given birth to another little girl. For several nights past Mary Anna had waited upon and watched by the sick boy without allowing herself rest or sleep. She attended to the blistering of the little sufferer, prepared with her own hands what little food he required, and nursed him with a lightness of hand which few, even among women, have the delicacy of nerve to command. She related from time to time to the doctor the minute particulars of the case in a simple and earnest manner, indicative of the strong affection she felt for her brother, and the deep interest she took in the hope of his recovery.

The curate had made several visits, relieving the tedium of the hours by relating to the patient much of the child-lore of which he was master. In this way he came before long to be a frequent visitor, most welcomely received by the parents, who had always entertained for him the highest esteem.

It happened, as the doctor and the curate were gossiping in the garden of the latter, on the evening of one of those days, that the subject of the conversation turned upon this family; when the doctor, innocent of exciting any interest of the curate's in the family for anything beyond that of the moment, largely expatiated upon the virtues of the pretty young nurse. "Yes," said the curate, in answer to the doctor's eulogies, "she seems to be a very good girl—very simple, though, and very young."

"I can tell her age to a day," said the doctor, "by looking at my old ledger. It seems only a short time ;

but I believe it is twenty years ago that I was first fetched to her mother—a bonny little woman she was, too, just such a one as Mary Anna is now. I remember the sun had just risen above the high peak yonder when the little thing first saw daylight. I was struck yesterday when I saw the poor girl, almost worn out as she was, with watching and nursing that little brother of hers—I was struck with the resemblance she bore to her mother at that time. She looked exactly as her mother did on that early morning when weary and worn out with pain. They are a nice family. I like Brown himself better than any other farmer in the neighbourhood, excepting, of course, Abel Armstrong. The like of Abel is a right treasure of a fellow anywhere in the world. Trouble has left *him* as water leaves a duck's back ; he seems all the better for going through it."

"Yes, indeed," said the curate, "his trouble has been a baptism to him. It has purified him."

"He never was *impure* since I knew him," replied the doctor ; "his soul was as upright as his body ; even as a boy, when he used to be the life and fun of the village. Brown and he have been staunch old friends many a long year."

"I remember them perfectly well : as indeed I have reason to do," said the curate. "It was soon after I came to live at Grayworth that they were married—both married on the same day. The first funeral here, and the first marriage at which I officiated, were for those two families."

"Ah!" returned the doctor, as he plucked a white rose bud and placed it in his button-hole, "and two nicer girls never blessed the hearts of men than the two girls married on that day. I can just fancy I see them now, as they walked home from church through the meadows in their white muslin dresses, floating along like two large lilies waving in the field. Not that I cared much about them as *women*; for I had reason at that time to be rather hard upon the sex generally. I thought the whole lot of them nothing but deceit. Still, as a picture, it was very pretty on that summer morning; I shall never forget it. But Abel, poor fellow, lost his little wife much too soon."

"We must bow to the will of Heaven in such matters," said the curate.

"Or to old Balaam Bentricks's ill temper," returned the doctor doggedly.

"Mrs. Brown looks well yet," said the curate. "Brown has been very fortunate in regard to his family, generally speaking. I always feel a pleasure in visiting them; the children are well ordered and obedient; and with the exception of little George, they are a healthy and superior family upon the whole, not that there is anything particularly bright about them."

"There's too much brightness about that girl of theirs to be cooped up in a sick room," said the doctor.

"A little light shows to advantage in a shady place," suggested the curate. "Her light in this case is available to a good purpose: so far, she is a comfort to her parents, and a blessing to the world."

"A blessing to the world!" repeated the doctor, contemptuously, "she's a jewel! It is wonderful how such a dumpling of an infant as she was could have developed into a bonny lass like that. I've often longed to adopt her for my own. Would that the world had more such. Look, now this unfortunate illness has come into the family, just as the mother is helpless, what a brightness that little lass throws over everything.

Like a moonbeam at night,  
Like a rose in the light,  
A star in the darkness, a flower in the morning,  
A gem that sheds brightness in twilight, or dawning."

"Come, come!" said the curate, laughing at the doctor's humour, "you had better step in and take my violin,

And sound the praise of blue-eyed Mary Anna,  
Like ancient minstrel in the good old manner."

"I don't know but what I should if she had a poetical name," returned the doctor gaily.

"Oh! never mind the *name*," said the curate.

"It is not the loud name  
That's the favourite of Fame!  
In the world's push and strife,  
Loudness ceases with life!

"But with real meritorious worth, the case is different; and who knows but that your little prodigy is destined to wear honours that will survive death itself.

There was a wreath that fair Fame made for worth,  
Regardless of titles, or riches, or birth:  
When death came that way and demanded the clay,  
He folded the chaplet to take it away:  
But Fame snatched it from him, and breathed on the bay.

"'Tis immortal!" she cried. "A deed! A good name!  
It lives through all times! It is sacred to Fame!"

She filled it with her fragrant breath,  
And hung it on the breeze:  
It floated on: defying death,  
It traversed land and sea,  
In every circle it is sung,  
Is welcome everywhere,  
Grows sweeter as it waves along,  
And purifies the air."

"Bravo! Benson," said the doctor. "You may as well *sing*, now you are about it. Come! I'm sure you'll not invoke the muses in vain. I'll give you the cue—

Erato surely e'er you lingers;  
Stay beneath her aerial wings!  
Strike the harp with nimble fingers;  
Lightly touch the lively strings.

Music cannot long be mute  
With Terpsichoré on tip-toe;  
Bring Enterpé with her lute;  
Mourn not that the world has woe.

Dip Apollo's dart in nightshade—  
Wing it straight where misery cowers—  
Sip the cup by pleasure bright made—  
Sing of Summer's rosy hours.

Sing of Beauty bathed in flowers.  
Sing of Love in leafy bowers.  
Sing of dallying with the hours.  
Sing of Marian's matchless powers."

"No no," said the curate with a beaming face,  
"You know better than I how to

Dip the sure dart in the deadliest nightshade,  
Wing it straight home to where misery cowers;  
Sip of the cup that by pleasure is bright made,  
Sing of the warm summer's soft, rosy hours.



Though I like your improvisation," he continued, laughing, "I must insist that, as it is *you* who sings of Polly's deeds like bard of old, it is *you* who must praise her with the harp like poet bold. But to come to plain prose: I must confess that I never remember having noticed anything particular in the girl myself. I certainly *will* see, however, if I can detect any of the incense about her that so inspires your enthusiasm."

The truth is, whenever the curate spoke to Mary Anna, she never had the courage to look at him. She longed to do so, as a timid bird in winter longs for the crumbs he dares not take. Every time she saw him she blamed herself for missing the opportunity, and promised herself to be braver in future. But her very determination of itself seemed to exhaust her spirits and leave her after each succeeding visit without having accomplished the desire of her heart.

Mary Anna had always loved the curate. When a little child, she would look up and fix her large blue eyes upon him in the pulpit, with earnest, intense admiration, regarding him—almost before she quite understood what she went to church for—as an angel, surrounded with a halo, as one who had come to tell her of Heaven; and not having yet learned the first commandment, she worshipped him. As a school-girl, she still looked upon him as a holy being of a superior order, whom it was her privilege as well as her delight to look up to and obey. As a young woman, she seemed to understand that he was a man, and that it would be possible for some woman, not

only to love him, but to sit by him in his own room, and to be called Mrs. Benson. No sooner had she come to this conclusion, than she was sorely disturbed in her heart. It was a long time before she settled it as a possible fact in her little head. Once having fixed it there, she did nothing but wonder whether he ever would be married, and where was the lady who was good enough, and fortunate enough, and clever enough to be his wife. She was never happier at this time than when she could sit alone musing over his words and actions. She remembered his sayings and doings, recounted to herself many of his sentences, and recalled his gestures; yet when he was in her presence, she was always dumb, and feeling foolish, she had the good sense, as a rule, to get out of the way as soon as possible.

The curate indeed during all his visits to the house, had never yet found his attention attracted to her. He was well acquainted with the fact that there existed such a being; not only from the constant reference that was made to her by the other members of the family, but also from seeing her flit bodily to and fro, hiding her head all the time as she did so, like a frightened ostrich. The next time he visited the house he made a point of conversing with her; more, however, to gratify the doctor's whim than from any particular curiosity or interest on his own part in the matter. Mary Anna averted her eyes every time he put a question to her, and never answered him during the whole of the time but in monosyllables. He could not

understand why Doctor Perry should think so much of her; still for once, though she seemed so much averse to his company, he determined to make her speak before leaving her. After he had made his adieus to her mother and the rest of the family up stairs, and Mary Anna had come down with him and opened the door, as she always had done when her mother was out of the way; he took her hand, gentler than in his usually indifferent manner of bidding her good-bye, looked straight at her, and asked her if she felt afraid of him that she always ran away when he came. The blood mounted to her face and suffused even her delicate neck as she hung down her head in confusion and surprise at the question. He lowered his head to get a sight of her while repeating his question. "No, Mr. Benson," she said softly.

"It is very strange," he said, withdrawing himself from her and smiling his adieu; "that I cannot get you to say anything but no and yes."

But in glancing as he turned away, he perceived that she had turned very pale. He could scarcely believe his senses. Where was the occasion for this evident sensibility? Could it possibly be that she loved him? He had never shown her any marked attentions; had done nothing in the least to win her affection! but it was evident that some strong feeling had taken possession of her, and he was obliged to persuade himself that she had taken a childish fancy to him.

The poor girl feeling deadly faint, stepped giddily

back, and sank on a chair just inside the open doorway, hoping vaguely that he had gone away without noticing anything particular in her manner. Benson felt something like a culprit ; scarcely knowing which course to take : fearing that she would faint, he did not feel justified in leaving her at that moment. "Why, Mary Anna," he said kindly as he approached her again, "you are not well ! What is the matter with you ?"

"My heart beats very much," she said, recovering herself a little. "I am rather tired. I shall be better in the morning." As he looked earnestly at her, she added, "I think there is a little something the matter with my chest."

"Why," he said, "Doctor Perry tells me that you are as healthy as Hygeia."

"Indeed !" she said, with a little start. "However came Doctor Perry to talk to you about me ?"

"He thinks you such a good girl to your brother."

"I only do what I ought to do," she said, gaining in self-possession as she thought of the little sufferer. "I like Doctor Perry, though ; he was always so good and so kind."

"He declares you are the best little nurse in the village," said the curate. "Indeed I think he would like to steal you, he is so fond of you."

"Steal, me ! What for ?"

"Why, to adopt you as his daughter, and leave you all his money, to be sure."

"I don't want money," she said. "I have everything I require."

"Then," said the curate, "you are a happy girl."

"Well, I mean I have all I want that money can buy."

"Then what is it you wish for that money will *not* buy?" said the curate.

"Oh, please, don't ask me."

"I believe you are a silly child, Mary Anna. It will not do for you to go on thinking and dreaming in this way. You must promise me before I go that you will not be so foolish."

"I am not foolish. What *have* I been thinking and dreaming about?" said Mary Anna, in some alarm at his pointed meaning.

"Never mind about that," said the curate. "Do you take care and be a good steady girl."

"Who dares to say that I am unsteady?" said Mary Anna, rising from her chair with more dignity than the curate could have supposed her capable of.

"No one. But I think it somewhat unaccountable that you should take it into your head to be frightened at me, and turn as pale as if I were a ghost."

"Oh, Mr. Benson! I never thought of such a thing."

"Well, then," said the curate, laughing, as he went away, "mind you don't do so any more."

On the day following he went as usual to see how the little invalid fared. By the advice of the doctor, Mary Anna and her father had been sitting up all night. The child had been very restless, rolling his head from side to side on his pillow the whole time, only relieving himself for an instant at intervals by

asking faintly for water, which he refused as often as he took when it was offered him. On that morning the doctor had given no hope of the child's life. When the curate called in the afternoon, all the family were gathered around the sick bed in a group, hoping against hope that the sufferer would revive, or, in case of the worst, that at least they might have the consolation of seeing the last of him. The mother, still weak, sat near, attending to her young infant, depending upon Mary Anna to wait upon the sick child for any sign he might show of his wishes. She had bathed his head and temples with vinegar and water for several hours. He now seemed easier and disposed for sleep. When the curate arrived they signed to him, rather than described, how hopeless they were of the life of the beloved boy. The visitor took his seat in the little circle, and then, almost as silent as the stern messenger that stood between them and the child, they all watched for about ten minutes while he slept. Then he awoke and jumped suddenly upright on his little bed, and in the very grasp of death asked for his clothes, saying he would be dressed and go out. "He is better!" the father called out. "That sleep has done him good. The fever has turned!"

The mother, with clearer instinct, embraced her dying child in an agonising farewell, and begged of him to lie down quietly. But he only repeated his demand. Mary Anna approached and leant gently forward till her breast supported him, and laying her healthy hand, softly as the irresistible pressure of

down, about his head and shoulders, she gently inclined him to the recumbent position, speaking a few words to him in tones so soft and sweet, they seemed to float about in the solemn chamber and hang on the ear like a voice from the spirit of Peace, "Lie down a *little* while, darling, and sister will take you out when you are better."

The child submitted calmly. "Yes, Polly," he said, "I will, if you will cover me over nice and warm. I was very hot before, and now I am *so cold*."

She smoothed his pillow, and placed him in an easy position on his bed. "There," he said, with a deep sigh, "I shall soon be better now." He closed his eyes and breathed rapidly for a few moments. Then one gentle sigh told that he and pain had parted for ever!

Who can tell the bitter anguish that has entered a mother's soul before she is brought to utter the words so many times repeated in the world by the bereft, "I have lost my child!" Mrs. Brown loved her George with the pure love that flowed from the tender heart of a fond domestic woman who sought neither to know nor to be interested in anything but what pertained to the happiness and well-being of her husband and children. All her affections were centered upon them: they were all the world to her; and now to see and feel one of them snatched away by the unrelenting hand of death, was like seeing and feeling a portion of her own life torn away from her. She moaned aloud and "would not be comforted."

The curate took his bible down stairs and sat in a corner of the room, so quietly that no one would have suspected his presence from any sound that issued that way for an hour or so. Then he spoke a few words to the mother concerning the "sure and certain hope" of immortality, and induced her to kneel down, with all who were in the house, while he offered a short prayer for resignation, thanking God at the same time that he had not left them without the chastening rod necessary to the purification of all living souls.

The father had taken peculiar pleasure in this boy, had watched him fondly from early infancy. He had taken delight in metamorphosing himself as an animal for the child's gratification. Many a time had he ignored the dignity of hands and feet, to go on 'all fours' round the meadow with that boy on his back screaming in ecstasy of fun. He had made whips for him, taught him to call the cows by name, and to lisp directions to the men, taken him on the cart to the hayfield, put him many a time on horseback with a promise to buy him a pony when he should be ten years old; had taken him between his knees when he drove to market, put the reins into his little hands, and returned with the triumphant declaration that Georgie had driven all the way, and must sit up and have something nice for supper. He had set down every trait in the boy's character to extraordinary sagacity, and gloried in thinking of the time when he should be a man. The pleasure and hopes of the father were now cut off with one stroke. He essayed



to comfort his wife, but found that he needed all his strength for the support of his own affliction. He uttered a stifled sob as he moved away, begging the curate to stay for an hour and be a little company for her and Mary Anna. Benson remained quiet during another interval, while Mary Anna was sobbing aloud. He begged her to retire with old Hannah Warmer, Mrs. Brown's nurse, to bathe her eyes and get herself refreshed. She returned after a few minutes, somewhat subdued, and the curate took his departure. Mary Anna, with a face inscribed all over with grief, walked for a few steps down the lane with him, as was usual in the village on a fine day when a friend had called. "Mr. Benson," she said, "you are so very good, that I think you will not be offended if I ask a favour of you?"

"Anything, Mary Anna, that is in my power, shall be done with pleasure."

"Thank you very much. I wish to ask if you will please write on a large paper in letters like print, those words out of the New Testament, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' I want to put it up in mother's room. I am sure it would do her good, and father too."

"Yes, Mary Anna, it is a good thought of yours. I will do it, and let you have it very soon." Her eyes filled with tears as she turned slowly towards the house again.

The curate went home and procured a sheet of draw-

ing paper at once, fixed it in his drawing board, and worked with pencil and brush till the text was finished. Early next morning he took it himself, and gave it to Mary Anna. She thanked him with genuine gratitude. Then, feeling that she could confide in one whom she regarded as almost sacred, she determined on the spot to confess herself and renounce her fault. "Mr. Benson," she said, demurely, "I was very vexed with myself the other day for letting you know how much I liked you : and I wish to tell you now, as you seem to know all about it, that I am not going to be foolish any more : I am afraid I should have been if poor dear little George had lived, but his death has made me feel quite different from what I did before. If you will come and see us often, Mr. Benson, and please to try and forget that I was so foolish, I shall never be so any more, though I do wish," she added, dropping her eyes, "that you had been my brother."

"But Mary Anna, you must bear in mind that it is very wrong to wish for what is not good for us. It is quite impossible for me to become your brother or any other relation ; so you see we must try and be contented with what *is*, and not hanker after that which is impossible."

"Impossible !" she repeated, with a look of blank dismay, which plainly revealed to the curate that if trouble had subdued her, it had not eradicated her affection for him. He was in a dilemma ! What could he do ? To discontinue his visits without some explanation would call forth remarks. To explain,

could not be thought of: so he resolved to go to the house less often than he had hitherto done, at all events so long as the family were in health.

Whenever, during the next few weeks, he did go, he observed that Mary Anna had either ceased to love him, or had schooled herself to behave as if she regarded him only with the same interest as she would regard any other friend.





## CHAPTER XV.

### THE CURATE'S DILEMMA.

With knowledge so vast, and with judgment so strong,  
No man with the half of 'em e'er went far wrong ;  
With passions so potent, and fancies so bright,  
No man with the half of 'em e'er went quite right ;  
—Spite of his fine theoretic positions,  
Mankind is a science defies definitions.

BURNS.

MARY ANNA'S parents frequently remarked that she had not recovered her spirits since the death of her brother, and talked of sending her on a visit to her aunt at Derby, in the hope that a change of air and fresh scenes might prove beneficial to her in softening down her sorrow. But Mary Anna was disinclined for the change: when pressed upon the subject, she told her friends that she had an aversion to going away from home. So far from improving with time, however, she grew weaker and thinner, though nothing could wring from her an acknowledgment that she felt ill. Mr. and Mrs. Brown at length, in the fear that she was sinking into a decline, sent for Doctor Perry to pay them a professional visit, and

begged of him to give them his candid opinion on her state.

When Mary Anna was seriously made aware of her parents' determination she only smiled, declaring that there was nothing the matter : and when the doctor really came to see her as a patient, she laughed outright and persisted in the old story that she was quite well. "Aye, aye," said the doctor; "but we must find out the thief that has been stealing the pretty roses from your cheeks!"

But he did not seem to know how to set about it. It was evident there was no organic disease, nor was any part of the system in particular affected. He ordered that she should take port wine mixed with some tonic powder, which he should send. "Now mind, Polly," he said, "I shall come to-morrow to see that you take it. It'll never do for you to go on in this way," he repeated, nodding and shaking his head good-humouredly as he bade her good-bye.

When he called on the following afternoon, Mary Anna was sitting alone, quilting a pink silk petticoat. "Well, Polly," he said, "how does the wine suit?"

"I scarcely know, thank you, doctor: it is dreadfully bitter, but I think it warms my chest."

"Yes," said the doctor, feeling the pulse; "but you are not up to the mark! I don't understand it! you ought to be well enough for all I can see."

"I think I am well enough, doctor: only, to tell the truth, I'm not quite so strong as I used to be. That is all."

"I say, Polly," said the doctor, inspecting her work, "what pretty patterns you are working on this silk. What is it for, a petticoat?"

"You have guessed it exactly, doctor: but it is only for a very best you know, to go to church in."

"It looks delicate enough for a wedding, Polly; it does, indeed. Now, I believe I've found you out! you are going to be married, and meant to keep it a secret."

"*Never*," said Mary Anna emphatically, and a deep blush spread instantly over the whole of her face and neck.

"Oh, indeed!" said the doctor, a little surprised that the mention of a subject common enough with most girls should be so startling to her. "What! have you turned Roman Catholic, and going to take the veil?"

"No, indeed, doctor; you know I should never do that!"

"Well," said he, rising to go, "I certainly don't see much the matter with you, excepting that you are giving way to low spirits. I believe you are getting mopish; so I shall send Mr. Benson to give you a good talking to."

"Oh, not for the world, doctor! Please don't!" she exclaimed with great trepidation, rising from her work, while the colour spread deeper over her face than before. "I really am quite well; or at least," she added faintly, as she turned pale again, "I soon *shall* be, doctor; I shall indeed!"

The doctor's eyes began to open to the state of

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affairs in the little maiden's heart. "Um," he mused, with his eyes fixed on the toes of his boots as he walked for some little distance, "mention of marriage! and of Benson! were the two exciting causes of undue palpitation. That little girl is in love with our curate: and her little head cannot sustain itself incessantly working on one idea. Um," he repeated, with a slight nod of the head and a little jerking laugh, "women are queer articles! they generally get over that sort of thing in about three weeks; but poor Polly must have been at it longer than that time to have succeeded in bleaching herself and getting rid of so much flesh as she has done. Hang it, this is a funny world; it's a pity for her to have blanched those roses of hers."

He sought the curate as early as convenient. After talking with him for some time about various matters, and failing to come round to the subject by degrees, as he had intended to do, he said abruptly, "I say, Benson! do you know how badly Mary Anna Brown is?"

"No, I remember that she looked rather pale the last two or three times I was there; she is not ill though, I hope?"

"She is!" said the doctor.

"You really don't mean to say so!" said the curate, in evident anxiety.

"It's a fact," said the doctor.

"Indeed," returned Benson, looking down his straight nose, and involuntarily biting his finger nails, "it is very awkward."

"More *inconvenient* than awkward," said the doctor, looking right into Benson's eyes.

Benson winced slightly, and looked puzzled.

"You'll have to go and see her," added the doctor, "I can do nothing for her."

"She is not seriously ill, I know, and I had rather not go," returned the curate, in some confusion. "She is such a good girl, doctor," he continued, "I wish you would get her married to some worthy young fellow." As he said this he turned pale, and his voice became so husky that he could scarcely make the last word or two audible: then suddenly a crimson spot mounted one of his cheeks and burned there, like an unwelcome torch that *would* reveal the truth.

"Why, Benson," said the doctor, thrusting his hands through his hair and rubbing his head, while he surveyed his friend all over with as much surprise and amusement as if he were surveying some strange interesting animal, "you are not afflicted with the fancies of folly surely at your age?"

"Well, doctor," he said huskily, "at *least* I'm not going to make a fool of myself."

Um," ejaculated the doctor, with a comical look, "it is about the last thing I should ever have dreamed of. 'An elephant might fly, but it is a very unlikely bird.' I never saw the force of that proverb before. At all events, Benson, you'll have to go and see the poor girl: she is very low indeed; and if she goes on much longer the way she is going now, the next thing will be that she will go off. At any rate she will have



vitality vibrated to the woman's voice, or caught the sound intelligibly. The eyelids quivered visibly, then opened slowly, like rigid portals, with some difficulty, wider and wider, as the eyes sought—while the immovable stillness of death was on every other feature of the face—to ascertain whence proceeded the cry; they looked on the old woman steadily for a moment with a strange, unearthly gaze, then seeming to penetrate through her, far beyond to an unlimited distance, they glazed over, and closed again for ever. The silent countenance, slightly disquieted for a moment, settled down again into an expression as of eternal rest.

The curate, being unwilling to leave the bereft old widow to watch alone at the bed of death, found it was daybreak when he turned towards home to seek a little rest. Shivering in the frosty air of the morning as he met the labourers going to work after their wholesome sleep, he almost envied them the robust health that welcomed the wind as if it had been the dew on Zahara; while to him it was a cold garment that clung about him like a winding-sheet.

With restless faculties strangely at variance with his drowsy senses, he stretched himself on his bed and dozed in an unrefreshing slumber, till his house-keeper tapped at his door and announced, "Eight o'clock, sir." Benson's appetite was not improved by the vigils of the night. After an apology for a meal, he walked into the garden, as he used ordinarily to do before breakfast, to give a little air to some choice plants that he kept in a glass-covered frame. But



to keep to her bed, and I don't know what the consequence may be in the end."

The curate had been sitting very uncomfortable for the last minute or two, restlessly turning over the leaves of one of the books upon the table. He now rose, and putting one hand into his pocket, began to walk about the room. "What is her complaint, doctor?" he said.

"*Benson on the brain*," said the doctor, dryly.

"What!" said Benson.

"Fact!" said the doctor, "I'm not mistaken in the diagnosis. I don't want to pry into your secrets; but I expect you know all about it."

"I suspected something of the sort," said the curate, addressing himself solemnly to the hearthrug; I've no need to keep it a secret from you, doctor."

"It is a sort of thing that will put you in a little quandary," said the doctor. "Those things always sat easily enough upon *me*: but *you* are of a different stamp. Besides, I never was in such a predicament as you are: there's one thing quite certain, that whatever course you take in the affair I know you'll come out of it as clean as a snow-flake."

"Thank you, doctor, but I'm not sure that I could say so much for myself. I could never have believed that a simple little girl like that could have made such havoc with a man's thoughts, and such inroads upon one's feelings. Her figure haunts me like a crime upon the conscience. I have battled with it night and day; aye, for hours together, even upon my knees, doctor."

The truth is, the curate was not well pleased to find himself brought from his high pedestal down to the level of ordinary mortals. When he first read by the clear light of Mary Anna's eyes that she loved him, he was bewildered at his own sensations. He fathomed at once the depth and purity of her soul, and its import unbidden reached his own heart and vibrated there by its vacuity. "Well," said the doctor, "you seem to have got into a mess. Since neither of you can get the coach out of the rut without the help of the other, why not pull together? You are always sure of a roof over your head; and you want a good housekeeper. There is no obstacle but disparity of age; and if she is satisfied on that head, who is to say nay?"

"I am, doctor," said the curate smiling and shaking his head. "I couldn't take advantage of such an inexperienced girl, to marry her because she happens to have taken a girlish fancy to me. In a few years' time she would be dissatisfied; and the sin of her discontent would lie at my door."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the doctor impatiently. "What have *you* to do with the future? Who forbids you the happiness within your reach? *You* are not in the garden of Eden! and yet, though it's plain you are both desperate after the same apple, you are so squeamish about lifting her up to the tree, where, with only your assistance, you might both share the fruit you are both longing for, and both be satisfied!"

"I cannot see it in that light," said the curate; "I

can only regard it as a great temptation that is besetting me."

"It is a pity then but the devil had chosen an uglier instrument!" said the doctor brusquely.

"He always paints such temptations beautiful," said the curate.

"He never painted her at all," returned the doctor. "Depend upon it, Benson, she is in better hands. Her beauty goes right through to the heart: it's as solid as a bar of bullion."

"It has great power over me, I must confess," said Benson. "But I hope to feel relieved after talking it over with you. It has been like a spell over me lately. Sunday after Sunday when I see her face as she sits in the church looking up at me, I am totally unable to suppress my rebel feelings. I feel as it were smitten, fascinated! and I find myself indulging over and over again in the thought that there is no face on earth—with the same expression—like hers; and you know, doctor, so far, that is correct."

"I always said the same," returned the doctor; "taking her altogether, that is, when she is well, there isn't a girl in this country to match her. Her face is like a little bunch of flowers. Two opening rosebuds for her cheeks, with a little crimson carnation mouth below, a couple of sprays of forget-me-not above for her eyes, and a white lily for her forehead, and there you have her, with her pretty light hair for the sunbeams."

Mary Anna had never ceased from her infancy to be

the doctor's reigning favourite. He had always persisted in calling her after the brightest flower in the garden, varying his cognomen as a matter of course with the varying seasons. She had been obliged to answer, one time or other, to a number of pretty names to please him, though in reality she possessed no extraordinary degree of beauty—excepting that of a very amiable expression—which any besides himself and the curate, and Frank Greenfield, had ever detected. A lively, affectionate girl, always cheerful in her occupation, and of good spirits, she was generally called “a very nice girl,” and one never failed to feel by a sense of pleasure in her presence that there was unmistakably something nice near.

“Had she been born but ten years earlier !” said the curate with a sigh, in answer to the doctor's flowery sketch.

“That's scarcely reasonable,” said the doctor, with a comical look; “since, according to such a design, her mother would have been but ten years old at the time of the girl's birth. Besides, admitting the possibility of such a phenomenon, Mary Anna, in all probability, would have been made up in a different fashion if she had been born at the date you specify; and you would not have identified her as the little pitchfork in the hands of his Satanic majesty for your special torment, as she has the honour to be, in your estimation, under existing circumstances.”

“Oh, doctor,” said the curate, smiling and shaking his head, “you know very well that I said nothing of

the sort. You comprehend my meaning well enough."

"I *know* very well," said the doctor, "that you have a forcible faculty for making difficulties, which I shouldn't have given you credit for."

"There is difficulty enough in the way," returned the curate—"not of *my* invention though. No doubt others have felt the same; and I must overcome it as they have done."

"By turning *aside* from it, I suppose!" said the doctor.

"But," said the curate as he paced the room rapidly, "to be possessed with so much stupidity at my age! I have no patience with myself. In spite of all my efforts, I *cannot* cure myself. You have no idea of the torture I have endured in trying to suppress this evil! The very thought of that girl makes my hands and arms twitch to be near her; and I *have* felt, God help me, that I should care neither for body nor soul so I might once embrace her. Above all, doctor, I am most egregiously provoked that I cannot master myself in the pulpit on Sundays; when I ought to feel pure enough in spirit to be able to touch the hem of an angel's garment with one hand, while the other should be lowered only in the endeavour to raise the lowly to the same spiritual height! A link between Heaven and earth indeed! I am in truth a miserable sinner. I never thought to become the victim of so much weakness."

"Don't make any mistake," said the doctor. "Such fierce wrestling with what you conceive to be an evil

does not enter into the hearts of weaklings. It is your *strength* that is your enemy in this case. A pink-and-white fellow, with a milk-and-water temperament, would most likely have married the girl at once, or perhaps have been cold-blooded towards her, and fool enough to himself to have ruined her, and cut at his own peace of mind at the same time by his folly and deceit. Or if he had been tormented with the white feather of conscience regarding such a marriage—as you have—he would have been crazy for about a week, and then have forgotten all about the affair. The case is very different with you. Few men live fresh and youthful in their feelings through so many years as you have done. You have been out of the way of temptation. Cultivation of faculties in the opposite direction has been unfavourable to sensual growth. The natural passion of love has been sealed up in you; like the undeveloped germ of an oak-tree in an acorn that has been kept above ground, and not allowed to come in contact with the earth. Apropos, Benson," he said, throwing out his legs, "I'll tell you a little fable."

The curate continued to pace the room, while the doctor, with his head settled back in the easy chair, told his fable thus :—

Two acorns and several inferior tree-seeds were set in a forest at the same time. They all germinated. All, excepting the oaks, grew up rapidly to maturity, and all enjoyed for many summers the zephyrs, the soft rains, the dews, and the sunshine. The oaks were yet striplings.



After a great number of years, the other trees ceased to flourish. Though all the good gifts from above descended upon them as usual, they withered and decayed: they had lived to the fulness of their time. The oak-trees were now in their prime: then there came a long drought, so that the leaves drooped and the roots thirsted, till one morning the earth was saturated with rain, and a heavy dew remained upon the land. The oaks drank deeply, and became almost overpowered by the sudden weight of the great benefit. In a lamentable voice they cried, 'What change has come over us? Why are we thus heavily burdened? Better had it been for us to have decayed early, like the other trees, than to have lived to be the victims of oppression.'

As the oaks said this, they shook with rage, and shivered their leaves to the ground. The outermost branches exposed to the hot sun, dried and died in fault of foliage. At this the lord of the woods appeared: 'Ingrates,' he said, 'have I not bestowed a better, longer life upon you than upon the other children of the forest? Yet when I knew your need, refreshed you plentifully with dew, enriched you bountifully with blessings, you sought not to comprehend me, but spurned your benefactor as a destroyer!'

One of the oaks bowed submissively, quietly put out new leaves, and lived in faith for the future to a good old age. The other, stubbornly defiant, stood immovable for a little space of time. Then there

came a mighty thunderstorm. It revelled in its fury among the trees. The lightning played about the broad bare branches of the sullen oak. Then suddenly one fierce flash rifted it to the roots. Thus the oak perished in its prime.

"Now, Benson," added the doctor in a serious tone, "which of the two oaks do you resemble?"

The curate was affected by so much considerate sympathy in his friend. "Doctor," he said calmly, "you are the best friend I have upon earth; but I must beg of you to excuse me when I tell you that I cannot suppose myself to resemble either the one or the other. After seeking High Counsel, I am compelled to differ in opinion with you as to the propriety of taking the step you advise, and," he added smilingly, "I hope and trust it will not be the death of me, as your excellent fable would imply."

"Well," said the doctor, rising to go, "*here you are, really in need* of the good gift that is set right before you; and you are fretting and fuming yourself to death, because you are too wayward and proud to acknowledge and accept it! That is the solution of the matter. I shall bid you good morning!"

"Pardon me, stay one minute," said the curate. "You wrong me there, doctor. I simply wished to be guided in the right way."

"Don't make any mistake," interrupted the doctor with a savage look: "you simply wish to guide *yourself* in your *own* way. You have been setting up your own self-will as the god of your idolatry, and appealing to

it as to an oracle. You are as proud as Prometheus," he added, raising his voice. "You defy the very heavens! and subject yourself to the galling of chains which you could snap at once if you would only submit yourself to the nature of existing things, and save yourself from the suffering that is palpable on your face, instead of allowing your liver to be preyed upon by the sullen vulture *carr*, which only Time or Death can strangle!"





## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE CURATE MAKES UP HIS MIND.

Who that bears  
A human bosom, hath not often felt  
How dear are all those ties that bind our race  
In gentleness together !

AKENSIDE.

**D**AY after day came and went without any apparent change in Mary Anna's health. Her parents, naturally of easy disposition, lived on in the vague hope that time would restore her to herself again at some indefinite period, until one day when she fainted. Being somewhat feverish in consequence of having "taken a cold" to which she was now unusually susceptible, the fatigue of nursing her baby-sister overpowered her so much that she was completely exhausted, and fell senseless in her chair by her mother, who stretched out her arms in alarm to secure the baby in the act of falling. This aroused Mr. and Mrs. Brown's anxiety for Mary Anna ; which was not at all allayed on the next morning, when they found that she had barely strength to enable her to get down stairs. Not having slept all night, her weariness added to her weakness, and caused her mother considerable

uneasiness. The doctor being sent for, advised that Mary Anna should go to bed at once, and not increase or aggravate her malady by the effort of getting up again, until she should be sufficiently strong to be able to do so without exhausting her little strength. He gave her a draught for the evening and the promise of a visit on the next morning.

Mrs. Brown being startled at daybreak by hearing from her own room that Mary Anna was talking, hurried into her room to ascertain the cause of her disquietude at so early an hour. Mary Anna was quite still, apparently in a sound sleep at the moment her mother reached her bedside ; presently she spoke again, but this time in a low subdued voice, with her eyes tightly closed: "I shall be very glad to come," she said, "the time seems so long down here."

"Glad to come where, dear?" said her mother.

"Oh! mother, is it you?" said Mary Anna, confusedly opening her eyes. "I thought an angel was talking to me. I've been dreaming."

In another minute she was in a heavy sleep, and soon began to talk again, but for some little time incoherently and partly inaudible: then her words became gradually more distinct as she spoke in tones clear and low, her voice swelling as she proceeded, she said slowly and deliberately, as if she liked to linger upon the words, "Yes, I shall always see him then, and never, never leave him. I shall hover about him while he preaches, and guard him when he visits the sick, and guide him whenever he is

in trouble. I shall watch over him everywhere and for ever till he dies. Then I shall come down and lead him up to that splendid place where the angels are singing. He loves singing, and the harp, and the violin: oh! he *will* be happy. Then we shall walk about together in the golden city, where the walls are made of jasper, and sapphire, and emerald, and chrysolite, and topaz, and amethyst, and other precious stones; and the gates are of lovely pearl, and there is no hot sun. He says that the light there is soft and sacred, something like that in our dear old church, as it comes through all the beautiful colours of the apostles in the windows, and makes you feel like as mother says she felt when little George's body was taken into the church, while *he* read the burial service. Mother said she felt as if the church must be one of the rooms that lead into heaven. The light was so lovely as it came through Jesus Christ and his disciples." After a short pause she added: "I think he will like me then. If he doesn't care about me, I don't think I can enjoy myself much, even though we shall be in Heaven." She heaved a deep sigh, and fell into a quiet sleep. Her mother, unwilling to disturb her, remained by her side until it was time to be up and doing. She had heard enough to excite her suspicion as to what was going on in Mary Anna's mind: and this was further verified by her husband when she related to him the whole of the circumstance. They were scarcely less easy about the cause, if it were the cause, than they were about the malady itself, which had now

reached a point to awaken their gravest apprehensions. The thought did not occur to either of them that the draught Mary Anna had taken might have contained some hallucinatory principle, or to assign the wandering of the mind to the weakness of the body. Mr. Brown, however, only regarded Mary Anna's affection for the curate as a childish fancy that had taken possession of her during her ill health ; and he soon dismissed the subject from his mind. Feeling now very uneasy about her state, he went himself after breakfast to see the doctor ; who questioned him at some length as to the nature of the symptoms.

"I'm very sorry to say, doctor," said Mr. Brown, "that she seems to have got hardly any rest all night again. We heard her i'th' middle o'th' night rambling on in a restless sort of a dreamy way. Her mother went and stayed by her side for a long while, but she could do nothing with the poor thing. She could neither wake nor sleep, but kept on talking in her dreams."

"What did she talk about," said the doctor.

"Oh, something about her little brother that we've lost," said the farmer getting up to look out of the window. After brushing the back of his hand across his face, he turned round and addressed himself to the doctor, slowly and distinctly, in a deep, hoarse voice : "Doctor, I've lost one child ! and I know what it is to have the *heart-ache* if ever a man on this earth knows it ! and I think I know how to bear it ! Now, I'm going to ask you a plain question ; and I hope you'll

give me a plain answer, and tell me candidly whether you think it is to be that I'm to lose another? If so, can you, or Mr. Ross, or Mr. Benson either, inform me why she was given to us to be the life and soul of her mother and me ever since she was born, and then to leave us like a couple o' bleak hill sides wi' nothing cheerful growing about 'em?"

"Well, Brown," said the doctor, "I'll come and see her; perhaps then I may be able to answer your *first* question. The other is out of my line, you know. You must talk to our learned curate about that! But, so far as I can see, we ought to make the best we can of anything while we have it, and to do the best we can without anything when we haven't it."

"Ah! doctor!" said the farmer, "you don't know what it is to have such a daughter!"

"No," said the doctor, smiling with irresistible humour at Brown's over-anxious fondness; "so you see it follows as a natural consequence that I shall never know what it is to fret myself about the loss of such a daughter."

"Ah! well," said the farmer, "any way, I thank the Lord for my little Mary Anna. God's will be done! We can hope for the best."

"You may depend upon it," said the doctor, "that whatever I can do towards her recovery, whether it be in the day or in the night, shall be done with all my heart."

The farmer went away feeling assured that if there were no invitation for the doctor to go out to dinner



just when he was wanted at home, his best attention could indeed be relied upon for the invalid.

In deference to her wish that she should not be away from the rest of the family, Mary Anna was reclining upon a temporary couch that had been made up for her in the living room, when the doctor made his appearance. "You saucy little puss," he said, hastening into the room, in his jovial manner, "to dare to break my commands by getting out of your bed."

"Well, doctor," she said, smiling, "it is so dull up stairs. You don't want to bury me before I am dead?"

"I don't see how I could bury you up stairs. Such a thing might have been possible some thousands of years ago, but it's out of the question now, and here in England, too. We couldn't do it, Polly."

"Ah, doctor, you are always so sharp. To tell you the truth, I was thinking so much about things above, I forgot for the moment that we have to go through the dark earth to get to the beautiful 'house not made with hands.'"

"Come, come," said the doctor, "this won't do; you are getting low-spirited." He made a gesture with the side of his head towards the door, and her father retired. "I say, Polly," the doctor continued, "you needn't mind your mother and me. Just tell me if—now, mind, you are on your oath, of course," he said, accompanying the words with a comical smile, and then suddenly turning very serious, "now, just tell me if you feel that there is anybody in the world who could cheer you up and make you better?"

Mary Anna looked at him beseechingly, as her face warmed to a pink colour. "I don't want to be better now, doctor; I only want to die and be happy."

"Now, Polly, that isn't answering my question. Do you want to see any one in particular?"

"I think," she hesitated, "that it would be best not to."

"Well, then," said the doctor, "come, tell me who it is, and we'll see all about it." Poor Mary Anna was crimson now. She tried, but could not speak a word.

"Why, Polly, dear," said her mother, "I believe I can give a guess. You want to see Mr. Benson. Why didn't you say so before, child?"

"Oh, no!" said Mary Anna, in great confusion; "I had rather not. Never mind now, mother. I used to like him very much, but I was silly then. Please don't talk about it."

The doctor was now quite confirmed in his previous opinion. It was many days since, exasperated at what he chose to term the pride and self-will of the curate, he had parted from him in no very kind spirit. Excepting at church, where, as a rule, he attended every Sunday, he had not seen him since that time. In the cool of the evening of the present day he opened the curate's gate and leisurely walked into his garden, where he was almost sure of finding him. There he was, industriously destroying a number of caterpillars. "You murderous fellow," said the doctor, as he shook the curate's hand heartily, and looked radiant with delight at the pleasure of seeing

him again ; " you'll have something to answer for, *that* you will ! "

" Aye," said the curate with reciprocal glee, as he looked upon the doctor's face again, " and so will they if I can catch them, for the *mischief* they are working ; " and he pointed to some large gooseberry-bushes, whose foliage had been nibbled away by the voracious larvæ until nothing was left but the reticulated skeletons of some thousands of leaves, pretty enough in themselves, and interesting to naturalists, but very unsightly to a good gardener and to the disappointed owner of the abortive fruit.

" That's a judgment upon you," said the doctor ; " Pharaoh's trees were eaten by locusts, you know, because of *his* stubbornness ! Your plague seems to be caterpillars ! "

" Nonsense," said the curate, with an incredulous smile, as he caught the doctor's allusion from the twinkle in his eye ; " but seriously, doctor, I've been wanting to see you all the week "—it was now Tuesday. " How is she getting on ? You go often enough, of course ? I thought she looked very ill on Sunday. "

" You are rather cool. You are getting over it yourself, are you ? " The doctor spoke as if he thought the curate an audacious monster.

" If you are determined to know," said the curate, a little piqued, " I am neither better nor worse : but surely that is no reason why I should be kept in ignorance of the state of her health ! "

" I can *tell* you," said the doctor, looking fixedly for

a moment at some roots that lay at his feet, then kicking them across the path, "there is nothing the matter with her that I can detect *but* that she is *dying* for want of *life*. She *must* be found missing one of these days if she keeps *going* all the time. There's no help for it!"

"Is it really so serious?" said the curate, looking out into space with compressed lips and a severe expression upon his face, as if he were about to do something desperate. "I shall go and see her!"

The decision seemed to cost him a considerable effort, for he gave a sigh, as of relief, after announcing it.

"You and Time mustn't dally by the way, then," said the doctor, "if you wish to see her alive!"

"What do you mean, doctor?"

"I mean what I said when I came in—that you'll have something to answer for."

"You are romancing, doctor. You know I don't believe in heart-breaking."

"It matters little what people choose to call it," said the doctor. "You know the celebrated proverb of the celebrated poet, 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.' So death by any other name is death the same. The case is getting serious," he added, with a rugged look. "She means dying! That is the one object of her thoughts at the present time; and she has made up her mind to accomplish it, and that is the surest possible way of succeeding in *most* things. To my knowledge it is very effective in throwing off

the garment of life. When it becomes irksome to the wearer, as it is to Mary Anna for instance, she orders by her will—or lack of will—that the nerves shall relax the muscles : the flesh, or covering of the framework, collapses by degrees, like a balloon, only slower ; and her bones will drop into the arms of the grim gentleman whom she is invoking. That's the way she'll give us the slip."

"For mercy's sake, doctor !" said the curate, looking aghast, "don't talk in that manner. You speak as deliberately about yielding the life of that precious girl as if she were a mere calf or a lamb that you were about to sacrifice."

"That would be about as the case stands," said the doctor, "if it had been put to Mr. Benson instead of to Doctor Perry, who is willing to do all *he* can to save the lamb alive ; while Mr. Benson is bleeding her to death one drop at a time."

"Oh ! doctor," said the curate, "you are altogether too bad ; but when you get an impression fixed upon your brain, it takes a cleverer man than I am to erase it. You know very well that I would give everything that I possess, aye and myself too, if I could save her, or be the means of restoring her."

"You should begin by marrying her," said the doctor laconically.

"But she is ill !" said the curate.

"A proposition of that nature might be reviving," returned the doctor.

"I *couldn't* marry her," said the curate, starting to

walk at a brisk rate towards the shrubbery. "It would be sacrilege."

"More like sacrilege," said the doctor, keeping pace with him, "to let her pine away and die, or live in misery, like a lonely spirit buried in a living sepulchre; and all for love of you, whose arms are aching to hold and save her, with no obstacle to prevent but your own stubborn blindness."

The curate readily forgave the doctor his rashness for the interest he took in Mary Anna. He only answered by asking what time he should pay his visit to her in the morning. "I'll call and go with you, if you like," he said; "as perhaps it would be better that she should not be excited on two different occasions on the same day."

"Very well," said the doctor. "Will ten o'clock suit you?"

"I'll be with you," said the curate.

According to arrangement, Doctor Perry and Mr. Benson went to Mrs. Brown's at about ten o'clock the next morning. Mary Anna was lying on her low couch, with a warm knitted wrapper thrown partially over her to prevent her from getting chilled. Her mother had taken care that her attire should be scrupulously neat and clean. The invalid being unable to lie with ease in the stiff stays worn at that time, she had crossed over her bosom a white woollen vest or kerchief which she used only on occasions of indisposition: over this lay the frilled collar of a snow-white night-dress or inner dressing-gown. Her skirt was of azure-blue

stuff, embroidered at irregular spaces with stars in gold-coloured silk, not after the artist of any ordinary school of design, but from some patterns which had been given to her grandmother by an industrious and clever nun, who had designed them with much care in her spare time, with a view to be made up into a garment for the robing of a bride. But as the dress was singular and out of vogue even before Mrs. Brown herself was married, she decided, after much hesitation, though not from any depreciation of the beautiful needlework of her mother, that as it was in the broad light of day and not by star-light that she was to be made a bride, she would lay aside this dress bearing the emblems of the night, and clothe herself in one of simple white, as more befitting the occasion and the morning light. The starry dress, though it had been worn but two or three times previously, was now, besides being odd in pattern, old fashioned in the bodice : so Mrs. Brown cut it off at the waist and devoted the skirt to extraordinary purposes, it being thought too good for every-day wear and too ancient for holidays. A bright-coloured scarf of soft silk, also of ancient date, answered the double purpose of comfort and elegance, by uniting the white woollen vest with the azure skirt round the waist, where, twisted in a simple knot at the side, it added a bewitching grace to the easy and unharnessed little figure. A white muslin cap, with a double border set all around with an italian-iron, was insisted upon by Mrs. Brown, who, in common with most English

matrons at that time, ignored the use of hair, however luxuriant it might be, and adopted a night-cap for every one who became an invalid. This, however, did not detract from Mary Anna's appearance : it rather served to show the contrast between the beauty of the living picture and that of the superficial addition ; as a perfect model of a statue would by the addition of some tawdry ornaments plainly enough proclaim the difference between the work of the true original and that of the pseudo-artist, who, not finding Nature equal to the standard of his own taste, exercises his skill in adding gew-gaws to sublime simplicity.

Great, indeed, was Mary Anna's surprise at seeing the doctor accompanied by Mr. Benson ! whose habit it was to visit only in the afternoon. He set her at ease, however, by wishing her a familiar though gentle good morning, saying how sorry he was to have learned from the doctor that her health was not improving, and asking her, in a genuine spirit of kindness, whether he could render her any assistance. She thanked him for his visit and his good wishes, and then smiled her welcome to the doctor ; who turned to pay his devoirs to Mrs. Brown, while the curate asked Mary Anna if she would like him to come and read to her, or to select any passages that he thought might be interesting or profitable for her to read in his absence. She turned deadly pale, trembling palpably as she told him that if it would not be too much trouble she would like it very much.

" Well, Mary Anna," said the doctor, turning



jocularly to the patient, "wherever did you get this celestial gown from. My stars, it is a shiner; why," he continued, examining it with unaffected interest, "here is one of the constellations, I declare."

"Well, doctor," said Mrs. Brown, "that's more than I knew. That was an old-fashioned gown that my poor mother worked when I was a girl. I was to have been married in it. My mother used to say that Sister Agnes, that is, the nun who made those patterns, said that there was a great deal in them, if we liked to take the trouble to find it out by looking at the heavens for ourselves; and if we didn't choose to, we didn't deserve the pleasure of knowing. But she believed that the blessing of God would follow whoever wore it."

"Oh, indeed," said the doctor, with a knowing look; "then you've put it on—Mary Anna for luck, have you?"

"No, not exactly so, doctor; but I cannot say but I thought there might be something good in Sister Agnes's word, for she seemed to know almost everything, and she was so good—she was always ready to study everybody's comfort, especially in illness; she'd do good anywhere wherever she could. The poorest creatures were never forgotten by her when it was in her power to help them; and I believe she often did more good than the doctors, though I say it. And as to herbs, she knew all about 'em. She'd tell us, that is mother and me when I was a girl, how one herb grew in China, another in Africa, some on different mountains, and others only by the water side, and

about all sorts o' things that she used to draw and show us ; she *was* clever, I believe she knew almost everything."

"Um," replied the doctor ; "and did your mother work all these stars ? They are wonderfully well done for an outsider, who would naturally be 'cumbered about many things.' I should have guessed they had been done by a nun. But, I say, look here, Benson ; here is the Great Bear right on his back, with his feet kicking up in the zenith. There is old Dubhe and Merak pointing *down* to the North Star ; and these little stars in the Little Bear too, look here ! they are capitally well done."

"Now, doctor, I believe you are joking," said Mary Anna, who seldom knew whether to believe he was in jest or in earnest.

"No, I am not joking," he said ; "I call that a sensible sort of a robe. Have you not another one with a terrestrial map or two on it ?"

But his eyes twinkled so comically, that Mary Anna was forced to appeal to the curate before she could be satisfied as to whether the doctor was talking sense or nonsense. After a little more badinage she said with a little puzzled air, that became her admirably just then, "Well, but, doctor, I can't see the use of knowing all about such things."

"No," said the doctor, "they would be of no particular use to you who have so many friends ; but to an old maid like Sister Agnes, who, of course, couldn't get a husband"—

"Oh, doctor! Sister Agnes was very good; I *know* she was; she might have had twenty husbands if she liked, but"—

"That would have been more than her share!" interrupted the doctor. "However, to an old bachelor like me, then, they are like so many acquaintances that I greet when I go out for my evening walks in the fine clear weather of autumn. I look up and say to one, 'Ah, old Arcturus, there you are, not gone down yet.' Then I cast my eye round and take a glance at a few general favourites, such as Lyra and Altair, as I watch for Sirius coming-up; and so on, making a few of the brightest of them my confidants of course."

"I should like to know, just for once, what you tell them," said Mary Anna.

"Ah!" said the doctor, "but they never tell again: that's the *best* of them. Perhaps I shouldn't like them so well if they could talk; what do *you* say, Benson?"

"For myself," said the curate, smiling, "I can fully enjoy the grandeur of a high star-light night; but I should most unhesitatingly give the preference to a companion who could converse. For though the most wondrous things in creation are worked out in silence, yet silence is not always desirable for us mortals. Is it, Mary Anna?"

"I should think not, indeed," she said, turning to address herself to the doctor. "Really, doctor, I shouldn't have thought you had been such a lonesome, star-gazing sort of a creature."

"You saucy little daisy," said the doctor, "I

wonder you dare talk like that to me! Why, the curate is a great deal more given to star-gazing than I am. Call *him* lonesome, if you like. He is as quiet as moonlight about it. But you favour him because he is younger."

It was painful to witness poor Mary Anna's confusion. The curate came to the rescue: "No such thing, doctor. Don't mind what he says, Mary Anna. You know he is a great tease. You must make haste and get better, and bring your mother to my house to tea the first afternoon you get out; and we'll persuade the doctor to come, too, and then you shall be revenged on him, to your heart's content."

Mary Anna looked uneasily about her as she joined her mother in thanking him; then casting down her eyes she took refuge in her dress again. "Are they really upside down, Mr. Benson?—these stars, I mean."

"Well," he said, smiling, "I can't see, unless you get up, whether they are all in their relative positions. Certainly you would never see them in an autumn evening as they are placed here."

"No," said the doctor; "but if you were called up out of a good sound sleep some fine autumn morning at three or four o'clock, you'd have a chance of seeing them towards daybreak exactly as they are here. I remember having such an opportunity forced upon me some twenty years ago, at the advent of a certain little piece of mischief not far off. Eh, Brown?"

The farmer, who had just entered the room, and was seating himself, nodded and smiled intelligibly:

"Ah, doctor," he said, "we just *did* make the kettle sing that night."

"The curate wants you to get up," said the doctor, addressing himself to Mary Anna, "so that we may see what constellations you have on the other side."

"Well, then, I'm not sure that I shall oblige him," said Mary Anna, with a little saucy turn of her pretty head, that made her look something like herself again.

"Will you oblige me if I come this afternoon?" said the curate.

"Perhaps I may," she answered, with a coquettish nod. But the hectic flush on her cheek admonished him to desist from causing her further excitement.

Here a huge custard was placed upon the table, ostensibly for the patient's luncheon; but as it contained some half score eggs and a large quantity of creamy milk, besides other good things, it was obviously not intended for her alone. The table was pushed alongside her couch as she sat up, while the two gentlemen, who had breakfasted that morning as usual at seven o'clock, accepted the invitation to sit at the opposite side of the same table and partake of the custard. After which, Mary Anna slightly pressed the coils of her spotless cap border against her pillow, now smoothed by her mother, while the three gentlemen did full justice to some plum cake and cheese. This over, they indulged in a little general conversation with the farmer and his wife. The latter, on seeing them rise to go, asked the doctor his opinion concerning her daughter. He put on a professional air as his

friends withdrew to the door. Feeling the pulse of the patient, he said a few mysterious words to her mother, principally to the effect that she must keep the patient quiet, give her no medicine at present, but pay particular attention to her diet. "I shall see you to-morrow, Polly," he said, starting off as he pressed her hand; "I must be off now, 'I've other fish to fry.' Good bye."

"Good morning, doctor."

"You were not prepared to find her looking so ill?" the doctor remarked, when he and the curate were on their way.

"No, indeed! I was quite shocked. She is very thin."

"Thin as Echo," returned the doctor; "I saw your lips quiver as you were taken by surprise; but you managed to get through very well. Now mind, Benson," he added, in a confidential tone, "mind that you keep to the clerical line of behaviour as strictly as possible this afternoon. I rather fear that she may have to pay dearly for the excitement of this morning. You must bear in mind that her strength decreases at an inverse ratio with the pulse, and that is brisk."

"Certainly, doctor, I understand. I shall not forget your orders. Good morning."

"Good morning," said the doctor; "I have to be at Sniffeld by half-past one o'clock."

"Sniffeld" was an abbreviation of Stonyfield; but the educated portion of the parish had somehow adopted the corrupted form of expression, perhaps in order to

be understood by the majority. Instead of having to *fry* some fish, the doctor had engaged to go and eat some at the house of an old acquaintance, the lord of the manor, formerly a famous sportsman; latterly almost forgotten, except for his cellar of rare wines; and so shunned for his growling, in consequence of frequent attacks of gout, that scarcely an old acquaintance, excepting Doctor Perry, cared to visit him.

The next few hours were spent by the curate in arranging and re-writing for Mary Anna some interesting fables of his own translating. These he wrote with so much care that they were as legible as letter-press. He found Mary Anna in the afternoon in a very weak state: the glowing colour that had flushed her cheeks in the morning had entirely disappeared; and an expression of weariness, almost of distress, which even his presence could not dispel, had taken its place on her countenance. She was now quiet and passive. He read some verses from the New Testament, and she replied with a few simple words of comment. This, with her grateful acknowledgments for the translations, was all that could be elicited from her, until her mother was called away to give some directions to Betty in the dairy. In three or four minutes afterwards the curate rose to go, asking her if he should call again the next day.

"If it would not be too much trouble," she replied.

"I shall regard it as a privilege," he said, as he raised her listless hand and kissed it, "if you will only try and get better."

She raised her mild blue eyes, which had seemed to grow larger since her indisposition, and looked benignly towards him as, with an effort, she took his hand and said, sadly and thoughtfully, as if it were the last time she was ever to address him : "I do not wish to get better ! it would be only to walk about with nothing very particular to do. It is all the same round, and I feel so tired you cannot think, Mr. Benson. I'm going where I shall be much happier. I can always love you then ! and it will not be wrong."

In a girl who had seen the world, who had been brought up in a city, or a town, or who had mixed much in any society whatever, this would have been altogether unseemly and inconsistent. But in Mary Anna Brown, who had scarcely ever been from the side of either one or the other of her parents, it was but an earnest and unsophisticated manner of bidding an affectionate farewell to a dear friend. So little vitality was now left to her, that all earthly desire failed her but the one of impressing him with her never-ceasing admiration of his character. This she did in the purest spirit, without hope or thought of recovery, as one on the brink of the grave.

"Mary Anna !" he replied, gently disengaging his hand and holding both of hers in return as he reseated himself by her side, "I cannot stay to hear you talk in this way. Indeed you must not give way to it, nor think of leaving us. You *must* get better."

"What for ? Mr. Benson," she replied. Scarcely making herself audible, she proceeded while he listened



patiently: "Mother has been telling me that Frank Greenfield has been talking so much about me to father, that he has promised to bring him over to spend a Sunday with us as soon as I am better: and father is so fond of him, what *could* I do? I cannot!" she repeated with evident dislike, "I *cannot*, I could not!—"

"Polly," said the curate smiling tenderly, "you are a dear, good girl, though I fear you have a little rebellious heart; but I wish to ask you something seriously: do you think it will make you worse if I ask it now?"

"No, I think not."

"Are you sure you could not marry Frank Greenfield if you were quite well?"

"Never! never!" she said, softly and firmly.

"Why?" said the curate: "he is a very estimable young man; good looking, industrious, and steady! What more could you have?"

"He's only a boy! I couldn't obey him if I were to try."

"You would not be so foolish," said Benson, "as to marry a man almost as old as your father?"

She only answered by slowly raising her eyes and giving him a steady and wistful look, that expressed at once the strength of her feeling and the weakness of her body, a look that said as plainly as eyes could speak, "It is too late to think of it now."

"Well, Polly," he said chafing her inanimate hand, "if I had been younger, I should not have denied

myself the happiness of asking for this hand before now, but I thought the little heart too young and bright to associate itself with a solemn old bachelor like me! You know, Polly," he added, smiling ingeniously, "that when they weave, the warp should correspond with the weft to make the fabric perfectly uniform!"

She studied for a moment, and then said, "But you know, we don't like all the stuff that is woven to be all over alike; we like some of it to be made into plaids and stripes; and then, when we don't want those sorts, the stuff is much prettier and shaded when the colour of the warp is different from the woof."

Benson was enraptured. "You precious little white-faced gipsy," he said, accompanying the words with half-a-dozen kisses, "I can see plainly enough that you have lost none of your notes! though the instrument is out of order. The harp is unstrung! Is that it? or have you been hanging it upon the willow, Polly?"

She burst into tears. "Well, never mind," he said fondly, "I will try to regain it, if you will promise to help me: but you can only do that by keeping yourself as composed as possible for the present. It is good for us to wait and quietly hope, Polly. Let us wait, dear."

He gently kissed her forehead as her mother re-entered the room, and they parted.



## CHAPTER XVII.

### CAUSE AND EFFECT.

And fate is kind to those who strive  
To make existence pleasant ;  
With heavenly joys, and simple tastes,  
And kindness ever present.

MACKAY.

"**A**H! this looks well," said the doctor, when he went to see Mary Anna at seven o'clock in the evening, and found her partaking of some refreshment.

"Yes," said the mother ; "it's a strange thing, doctor : but I thought she would have died till about half-an-hour ago. She was as white as a ghost. I couldn't get her to take anything but a teaspoonful of sherry in a drop o' water ; and a little while ago she seemed to cheer up all at once, and the thought struck me that she might be able to take something more substantial, and she has quite an appetite, you see."

"She musn't eat with too much avidity, though," said the doctor. "It is only so much as she can digest that will do her good : all the rest is obstructive to recovery. Well, well," he said, as he was about to depart, after having stayed some minutes, "it is a

good sign when a patient revives towards evening. You mustn't be alarmed, Polly, if you don't sleep very well to-night. Good bye, and God bless you."

The following morning found Mary Anna with a distracting headache. Her countenance, ordinarily placid and gentle, now appeared almost miserable. Even the doctor had a difficulty in forcing a smile from her. "It is bad for you to bear," he said. "Better not take anything for it, however, to-day; we'll see to-morrow how matters look. Put wet cloths round the head for the present; this pain will relieve the nervous system. You musn't be low-spirited, Polly; your general health is improved rather than otherwise since yesterday; though, of course, this pain in the head is very troublesome for the time. I think you'll be better to-morrow."

Mary Anna was grateful for the hope held out by the doctor, and felt more disposed to bear with patience the pain which, strange as it was to her hitherto healthy system, seemed almost unendurable before he gave her this little consolation.

In the afternoon of the same day the doctor encountered the curate, who eagerly inquired about the health of the invalid. "Ah," said the doctor, looking comically askance, "I want a word with you. You didn't obey my orders according to promise yesterday. You were to be very quiet and clerical, you remember!"

"I don't think I went beyond my duty," said the curate.

"What!" said the doctor. "Is it the duty of a parson to make an offer of marriage to all the sick women he visits?"

"I did not do so to *her*," replied the curate, in surprise.

"Well," returned the doctor, laughing, "to talk love to them, then." He spoke as if he knew all that the curate had been saying.

"How do you know that I have been talking love to anybody?" said the curate, innocent of the doctor's waggish dissembling. "I hope I have done no harm. I only did what I felt called upon by the necessities of the case to do."

"I thought as much," said the doctor.

"Why? How? In what way?" asked the curate, eagerly.

"It was the *effect* that drove me to suspect the cause," said the doctor, with a shrewd look at his friend.

"Oh, indeed! you only suspected," said the curate, evidently relieved. "But what induced you to suspect it?"

"Why, you see," said the doctor, "for want of use the machinery was getting rusty; being set to work again it was found hard for the labourer; or in other words, Benson, a violent attack of cephalalgia in that state of weakness induced me to think that there must have been some subtle fluid, call it what you will, that set in motion the delicate nervous matter, the principal seat of which, as you are aware, is the brain; and I

revolved in my own mind that there could be nothing extraordinary in the simple life of the Browns to have caused this, excepting that there might be in the patient the sudden awakening of a hope, a desire, a sentiment, or something resembling a *passion*, as closely as passion could be resembled in an ethereal little being like her; which passion, in its forced repose, had become nearly dormant, and so remained until a shock, akin to resuscitation, electrified the whole frame and left its disturbing influences vibrating in the system. Now, as I very well know that you possessed the only battery capable of producing such a shock, I thoroughly believed that it was the effect of that battery that I witnessed. How could I arrive at any other conclusion?"

"Now, doctor," said Benson, "you are too bad to have wrung a confession like that out of me almost before I had made it to myself. But she is not worse, I hope? you have not told me that yet!"

"Rather the contrary upon the whole I think," said the doctor; "though she is sadly tormented with the pain in her head to-day."

"No!" said Benson, with an anxious look; "impossible; you are not in earnest?"

"I am, indeed," said the doctor, affecting gravity; "many mortals have had the headache before this one, and have survived it!"

"Oh, I see," said Benson, smiling, "there's no immediate danger: but I hope I have not been the means of bringing on this headache?"

"We'll not argue that question for conscience' sake," said the doctor, shaking the curate's hand and his own head at the same time, as he laughed heartily. "I suppose you'll go and see for yourself how she is? It's of no use for me to advise you either one way or the other. You didn't attend to my orders *yesterday*, remember."

In spite of the doctor's advice that Mary Anna should keep up her spirits, they were at a low ebb all that day. She rallied for an hour or so after his departure; but it was only by dint of sheer effort, the very exertion of which made her more feverish and increased her fatigue, till she relapsed into what her mother termed a "regular cross-grained fit." All the little inconveniences which she would scarcely have regarded at any other time were now magnified into anxieties. Her couch was hard. The weather was hot. Her tea was cold. The wine and water too sweet. The place too noisy. She could not bear the sun. She would go and rest in her own room but that Mr. Benson was coming. She almost wished he would not come to-day. Indeed, she felt so little inclination for his company that her indifference was visible on her face when he arrived. He was rather disappointed at a reception of less warmth than he anticipated; but he made all due allowance for the state of her health; and though it was far from the pleasant visit he had looked forward to, he was at least contented in his unshaken faith for the future.

This visit afforded Benson an opportunity of seeing

the object of his choice as a *woman*. Impracticable and unsound as his conception was of the sex generally, he had a vague notion that as wives they comprised only two orders of beings—Seraphs and Shrews; that a woman must either suffuse her husband with glory or envelop him in gloom. He now meditated seriously upon the present case, and concluded at the end of his cogitations by reminding himself that even the holiest thing in this world is of the earth, earthy. His common sense told him, after his observations, that he had seen Mary Anna exactly herself, neither more nor less, only irritated by pain and suffering; just as a true picture is of the same value, though it be placed for a time in an unfavourable light. After an hour's stay he departed, not ill pleased either with his little girl, or at the price he had paid in his slight disappointment for the experience he had gained.

At the dawn of the following day Mary Anna found herself better beyond all expectation. The fibres of her affections had begun to feel outwardly for support. Looking round her room, she saw there many little tokens of remembrances that linked her present thoughts with feelings experienced in pleasant days gone by. She felt a tenacity to life to which she had for weeks past been a stranger. There was so much now that she wished to live for, so many ties to bind her to the world.

While all in the house, excepting herself, were yet asleep, the sun danced up from behind the opposite hill and darted through the little chink of her dimity



window curtains a warm shaft of light, that flirted with her hair and eyes till she turned perforce from side to side to avoid blinking. Her own vivacity astonished her. But the salutation of the warm sunlight was so welcome, she arose presently with a start to meet and enjoy it to the full. Almost before she was aware of what she was doing, she had drawn her window curtain sharply aside and was looking out at the morning, now broad awake beaming over the landscape. A soft wind had just sprung up: the trees waved cheerily, still bearing on their branches thousands of sparkling drops of dew, flashing and scintillating as the rocking boughs caught fresh gleams of sunlight. Up to the very topmost twigs of the tall trees the gladsome birds were holding high jubilee, singing, swinging, swaying, chattering, chirping with delight of life and fellowship. A sweet scent of fresh earth pervaded the ambient air with gentle promises of plenty,—promises so sweet that they were welcome as the gracious gifts to follow.

Mary Anna was deeply impressed with the harmonious beauty all around her. She experienced an indefinable sense at once of the pleasure of ardent desire and entire gratification, and she was satisfied that life was good. Then she prayed that it might be granted to her yet a little longer.

The miser who in his day of bargains has had a run of luck knows what it is to feel gratified. The famished wayfarer, finding an unexpected friend and a wholesome meal, can tell what it is to feel satisfied. The mother,

who, after heavy weariness of painful delay, at length smiles thankfully on her new-born infant, understands the meaning of tranquillity. But these various kinds of joy, born of misery and sorrow, are of short duration, in no way comparable to the supreme happiness that enters the heart of a true girl just risen from her knees, with the certainty on her soul that her prayers will be answered. Mary Anna remembered the words the curate had spoken on the previous day, when she took little heed of them: "God is ever waiting with the blessing we require; if we ask, it will be ours. It is good for us to ask as well as to receive." She prayed now as she had never prayed before, for life, for happiness, for the love of him who was to her the epitome of all loveliness: and she prayed in the faith that these gifts, the most precious on earth to her, would be hers.

Such joy as Mary Anna now realised was too much to be borne quietly. She walked rapidly about her room while dressing, knelt down in gratitude several times during the process, until her strength being almost exhausted from the demands made upon it by her exuberant spirits, she was forced to rest again, and then from very weakness to restrain her enthusiasm. But a new lease of life was written in her eyes that morning. Instead of the indrawn expression they had worn of late, they now expressed the pleasure of contact with outward things; and, notwithstanding that she was pale and weak, every member of the family assevered when she made her appearance at the breakfast table that she looked like her old self again. Her

eyes were bright with the hope which had come to her on her knees. She looked radiant as with victory, like the warriors of old who wrestled with the assurance that the gods were on their side. Mary Anna had struggled bravely against her love for the curate, and submitted in the faith of Heaven, till Heaven itself seemed to interpose on her behalf : and now she believed that Heaven was her guiding-star, her shield and safeguard.

In ten or twelve days there was a marked difference in her whole demeanour. Exercise became a pleasure to her ; and though she was yet liable to much fatigue, every day saw a marked improvement in her. Her gait was free and natural, without the heaviness it had shown for some time past. The little weariness she felt at the end of each day insured for her a night's untroubled rest, and renewed and increased strength for the morrow.

A spirit of cheerfulness now prevailed in the family again. Its difficulties had no longer that weight they had assumed while Mary Anna's illness hung like a cloud over the house ; and its happiness, though very little thought about, was demonstrated by frequent peals of laughter elicited from the droll sayings of one or another suggested by funny affinities. The house itself now wore a lighter aspect than it had done for some time past ; not that it had ever been altogether dull. In its dullest state it could no more resemble a disorderly or ill-arranged house than a shady grove on a rainy day resembles the blank of a dark archway.

There was always about the Browns something for the eye to dwell upon with kindness, or the mind to contemplate with profit. The sweet, clean, bright appearance of everything about bespoke unfailing industry and comfort. Mrs. Brown, with her wholesome, weather-worn, but well-looking face, her busy, bustling ways, and kindly encouraging words ; her husband, with his pleasant in-coming, the shepherd-dog at his side contentedly wagging his tail and looking up to one and another for a bit, or a drop, or a pat, or a word of recognition before going in quiet obedience to lie down in the corner on his mat, carefully avoiding to disturb the less faithful but friendly tom-cat. Then there was the round-eyed, broad-chested, fat-faced baby, lying kicking and crowing in the cradle, opening and shutting its little rosy fingers, taking a sudden fancy now and then that they must taste as nice as they looked, would laugh and kick with redoubled vigour as he tried to cram them altogether into his mouth, biting and rubbing them against his gums, the little coral caskets that yet enclosed his pearls, until the tiny, double-dimpled fists were bright and red as ripe "love-apples," as indeed they were. The gleesome little creature seldom cried, and that only when it required some sort of attention ; attention that yielded in its turn, if one's eyes and ears were to be trusted, most ecstatic enjoyment to the mother, though she professed to regard it only as an unavoidable duty, which, however, she managed to get through with a considerable deal of glee. Not that this was by any means an isolated

piece of diplomacy between mother and child : for the care of infants, when all is in harmony with the common order of nature, seems to combine some little labour with very much lively amusement.

Mrs. Brown was full of life and spirits yet, showing no sign that there would ever come a day when those intrinsic attributes should leave her. Her daughter, Mary Anna, when in health, was as much like her as a round unfolding rose is like another rose on the same tree sufficiently full blown to show what gardeners term the "eye," the torus, the ground-work character of the flower.

Mary Anna was sensible that her behaviour on the previous day had not been quite so amiable or gentle as it might have been. She could find no peace of mind until she had spoken of it to the curate, who came in the afternoon. "I cannot think," she said, "how I came to be so cross as I was yesterday. I'm sure I tried all the time to get into a better temper, but somehow I couldn't help it, do all I would, I could *not* get into a pleasant humour ; and the more I tried the more vexed I felt, till I thought I wouldn't try any longer."

The curate was in the habit of listening to confessions and troubles almost without limit. He was compelled to lend an ear to them whether he would or not. By these means he was acquainted with the inner workings of many a family history of which no other soul in the village, but those concerned, knew anything. He was familiar with several little comedies,

and even one or two tragedies, enacted by different members of some of the families of the neighbourhood now removed to a distance, besides an entertaining variety of incidents connected with a few of the more adventurous of their relations down to the third and fourth cousins. He was not surprised now at hearing Mary Anna confess her faults. She did so just as any other little sinner would to any other attractive parson. After remaining perfectly placid for some minutes, while she continued to bewail her misdemeanour, Mr. Benson smiled as he addressed his reply in brief to her mother: "Polly is not quite satisfied because she has found out that she is not an angel."

"I hope to the Lord, sir," said her mother, "that for the future she will be less like an angel than she has ever been yet, for I was quite afraid a little while ago that she was going after her little brother. It's shocking to see how all the good children, and grown up people too for that matter—how all the good sort die and all the bad ones are left."

"I hope you don't think so very badly of us who are left behind," said the curate.

"No; but you understand my meaning, sir; and I expect you'll say that it's quite right it should be so, and very likely it is; but I must say that I can't exactly see it as I ought to yet, and no doubt that is because I'm one o' them that see through a glass darkly, as you were reading of the other day. At any rate there's no mother that I know of who'd willingly have parted with such a child as my poor Georgy. He

was an angel if ever there was an angel upon earth. He would sit and read in his little book by the hour, and was always so quiet and contented with everything that was given to him; and though he loved to play with his father, he never would romp about with the boys like other children. And there's our little Harry, he's the most rumbustical boy that ever was born; he lets nobody have any peace till he gets *his* turn served; and if he takes it into his head that he wants you to do anything for him, law bless you, sir, you can no more put him off than you can put off a thunderstorm."

"Harry is a good boy though, upon the whole," said the curate. "He will make a fine man some day. You wouldn't like to part with him?"

"Part with him! I should think not, indeed. His father 'ud never lift up his head again if anything amiss were to happen to Harry. He used to take most notice o' poor little George when he was alive, because he pitied him so and wished to encourage him to play about, in hopes that he might grow stronger. He was as gentle as a lamb," she said, with a deep sigh; "he would never have complained of any neglect, poor darling."

"It is *well* as it is," said the curate. "Our Heavenly Father knew which to take and which to leave. Harry will get through the life in this world much better than poor George would have done: and the thought of heaven was much more welcome to George than it would have been to Harry."

"Yes, indeed," said the mother, "Harry is horrified at death."

"That only shows that he is fully absorbed with *life*," said the curate. "His turbulency that you speak of is nothing more than boyish vivacity; and there will come a day—if I mistake not, Mrs. Brown, when the bubbles of his youth are burst, and the froth gradually subsides into the channel that Time will mark out for his energies to fall into—when his life will flow on usefully and quietly, and will carry much benefit with it wherever it goes."

"Well, thank you, I'm sure, Mr. Benson, for that piece of encouragement," said Mrs. Brown, smiling. "I'll try and think of it some of these busy days when I'm hard pressed for a minute's time, and he comes in as hungry as a hunter, and worries for his supper like a famished lion."

END OF FIRST VOLUME.





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